DREAMS
FROM THE
WITCH HOUSE
FEMALE VOICES OF
LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR
EDITED BY LYNNE JAMNECK

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Dreams from the Witch House: Female Voices of Lovecraftian Horror

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Introduction

Lovecraftian.

What is it? What is it not?

This can be a difficult question to answer. Certainly, a Lovecraftian narrative may include the places, spaces, people and *Things* that Lovecraft himself wrote about in his short fiction, novellas and poems. But despite the label that has been so intrinsically linked to one writer in particular, beyond Lovecraft lurks something more ambiguous, more ineffable, more *uncanny* than even Yog-Sothoth, Shub-Niggurath and Nyarlathotep. After all, no matter how difficult these names might roll off the human tongue, the creatures they describe have still been made concrete, rendered *identifiable* things and as such, we can quantify them.

The stories in "Dreams from the Witch House: Female Voices of Lovecraftian Horror" attempt in different ways to access this *beyondness* and relay it in a manner that can partially reveal the shadows that dwell on the periphery of our subconscious minds. In doing so, these twenty stories reveal that a 'Lovecraftian' story might not include any of the traditionally recognizable components we have come to expect from such a tale (though they do make brief appearances; as a bonus, you will also find out exactly who watches over The Tentacled one while he sleeps).

The cosmological nature of Lovecraft's work allows authors to employ subject matter that is wide in scope. Nonetheless, throughout the stories in "Dreams from the Witch House", it becomes clear that, in contemporary Lovecraftian narratives, one aspect has become particularly terrifying – that's right, look in the mirror, you will see it there. Of course, perceiving ourselves as our own worst enemy is not a psychically easy task. Just like Danforth in "At the Mountains of Madness", we place ourselves at risk of

psychological schism when we dare look at what is behind us, or more presently, *inside* us.

Why a collection of contemporary Lovecraftian stories written by women? The evidence for answering this question is there for anyone to see; simply review the Table of Contents from Lovecratian-inspired anthologies over the past number of years (and there are many) and it becomes evident that the bulk of contributions published in these collections were written by men. Here, some draw what seems to them an obvious conclusion – *women simply don't write Lovecraftian fiction*. Of course, anyone who has consistently read both Lovecraftian and horror fiction in general will know that this is not the case.

Perhaps it is simply that women write the Lovecraftian differently than many of their male counterparts traditionally have. There is something extremely *human* about the stories included here and in Lovecraft, the focus has often been on the *non-human*; even in stories where tentacled and many-eyed gods only make their appearance on the last few pages, stories often doggedly build toward the reveal of these creatures from the very start, making this essentially their *raison d'être* for being told.

The stories in "Dreams from the Witch House" celebrate humanity, both the good and bad.

Fear, greed, curiosity, uncertainty, terror, revulsion – all of these traits and more arise within the stories contained here. Yet they evidence confrontations with terror and the subsequent outcomes of these conflicts that in many ways feel more decisive than Lovecraft's penchant for having his protagonists succumb to madness. What is more terrifying—giving in to insanity, where the mind erects a protective wall between reality and psyche, or processing terror rationally and accepting it as part of reality?

Bela Lugosi was purported to have said, ""It is women who love horror. Gloat over it. Feed on it. Are nourished by it. Shudder and cling and cry out-and come back for more." This female feeding-on and return to the horrific is another interesting notion for reflection where Lovecraft is concerned. Consider that ultimately (with some exceptions), the Lovecraftian seeker after truth often

finds himself inevitably overcome by insanity, an affliction that can be viewed as a final separation of what it means to be human. In Lovecraft, as verified by the Providence writer's masterful use of intensifying dread toward an inevitable narrative conclusion, a return to horror is not a willing one; and when such a return does occur, it is generally as something no longer human, as in "The Shadow Over Innsmouth". It is therefore interesting to note that the kind of "gibbering madness" so often found in Lovecraft is not in evidence here; characters *do* question themselves, their behaviours and motives, but the slip into uncontrollable madness is much less obvious here. Do women have a greater capacity for absorbing the horrific? Interestingly, among the stories here, a story that comes closest to exemplifying Lovecraft's blend of insanity is told from a male perspective…

As noted, not all of the stories collected here are told from female perspectives and this offers yet another thought-provoking diversion in terms of how Lovecraft approached the Weird; we know he rarely included female characters in his stories, and even when he did, they were at best underdeveloped, serving mostly as catalysts for the horrific elements that would come to bear themselves out on the male psyche. Did Lovecraft intentionally eschew female perspectives in his work (for whatever reason), or had he simply not known *how* to write them, how to project their perceptions of the horrific within the context of his own mythos?

Regardless of such speculations, some of the most exciting Lovecraftian fiction is currently being written by women. Contemporary Lovecraftianism is moving away from the Elder Old Guard who – though they will always remain an essential backdrop to Lovecraft's expanded universe – are perhaps in some ways becoming as stifling to diverse perspectives of the unnameable as Lovecraft's own views on a number of topics. "Dreams from the Witch House: Female Voices of Lovecraftian Horror" aims to magnify the scope in which writers can express terror when paying homage to "The King of Weird", as Joyce Carol Oates refers to Lovecraft in a 1996 essay. The cultists have moved into the 21st century where new horrors await. The grimoires need updating, or

we face the prospect of fighting horrors that we may have been able to defeat, were it not for a case of short-sightedness.

Lynne Jamneck
October 5, 2015

Shadows of the Evening

Joyce Carol Oates

1.

In the late winter of 1928, when she was sixteen years old, my mother's mother Magdalena Schön journeyed alone by train from the Black Rock district of Buffalo, New York, five hundred miles eastward to the seaport of Edmundston, Massachusetts. Never before had the shy, inexperienced girl traveled anywhere by herself; rarely had she ventured out of the German-Hungarian neighborhood in which she'd been born, to immigrant parents from southern Germany; she spoke accented English which felt to her, in the presence of strangers, like a speech impediment or a physical deformity. She was terrified of leaving home but had no choice: there were seven children in the family, too many to feed and clothe and care for, and an eighth soon to be born, so her parents had decided to send her to live with an elderly aunt of her father's, a widow with no children who was bedridden after a stroke and terribly homesick for someone from the family, who lived by herself in Massachusetts. *But why must I go, why must I be the one?* Magdalena protested, and her mother said, smiling, as if this were an answer, *Your aunt Kistenmacher married a rich man, she will leave us money.*

In a state of shock mistaken for acquiescence Magdalena was put on a crowded New York Central coach car with a single battered suitcase and a satchel containing sandwiches and drinking water and a prayer book and a rosary; she'd been cautioned *Don't speak to anybody, not even the train men. Just give your tickets.* Stiff and upright in her seat beside a sooty window Magdalena gritted her teeth against the train's lumbering and lurching and ceaseless vibrating; she dared not look at anyone, least of all the brusque, uniformed conductor who took her ticket; for most of the first day she stared

sightlessly out the window or shut her eyes, her lips moving in silent prayers to the Virgin Mary she came to know, less than one hundred miles into her journey, were useless. She did not cry though from time to time bright tears glistened on her cheeks like raindrops. For crying, too, was useless.

She was thinking *My mother doesn't want me! My mother sent me away.*

For of the myriad facts that might be said of Magdalena Schön, this was the cruel, inescapable fact, the fact she would recall for the remainder of her life which would be a long life *My mother didn't love me but sent me away.*

The coach car was uncomfortable, overheated, jammed with travelers, most of them men who gazed upon Magdalena with interest. Some stared at her without knowing what they did, like men dreaming with their eyes open; others were more deliberate. Magdalena gave no sign, of course. She had long learned, since the age of twelve, never to meet the eyes of strangers even by chance. She was an attractive girl of moderate height who looked as if she'd grown swiftly in the past year. Her skin was fair, healthy, lightly freckled; her eyes were wide-set and thickly lashed, a deep, placid blue; her wavy wheat-colored hair was dense as a horse's mane and had been neatly plaited and wound in two coils around the sides of her head, like a telephone operator's earphones. On her lap was the satchel into which she looked repeatedly, as if checking to see what might be lost. She hadn't any appetite for the food her mother had packed for her, which had begun to smell rancid, but could only sip from a jar of lukewarm water, to ease her parched mouth, and then she burst into a spasm of coughing, with a sound like hoarse weeping. She wore rust-colored clothes that might have been handed down from an adult woman, and old-fashioned leather shoes, or boots, with complicated laces. She looked, not like 1928, but like 1918. In school she'd been one of those children of immigrant parents so shy and uncertain of themselves they were considered "slow"; at home, she'd been made to feel there was something wrong with her that justly provoked impatience in others. She wore a perpetual expression of chagrin and vague

embarrassment. When someone, usually a sister, came to her defense saying *Leave Magdalena alone, she can't help it*, Magdalena was stricken with emotions of gratitude and shame as if she'd swallowed something delicious the wrong way.

A man seated across from Magdalena did speak to her, as the train came clattering and shrieking into the Albany station that evening, asking if she'd like to join him for dinner in the dining car; but Magdalena, staring out the window with dolorous eyes, her rosary twined through her fingers and her lips silently moving, seemed not to hear. The clumsy satchel was on her lap. She had ceased thinking and in a haze of oblivion sat prepared to be hurtled eastward into the deepening night to a fate so vast and incomprehensible she had ceased trying to consider it as she'd given up considering the geometry problems certain of her boy classmates at school solved so readily. Thinking, as the train wheels rolled, *She sent me away. Sent me away. My mother didn't love me but sent me away.*

And then at dawn to her surprise Magdalena woke stiff-necked and dry-mouthed from a night of patchy, disturbing dreams to see a slow explosion of light at the horizon; an unknown river creased and sparkling in the darkness and broad as the Niagara. The train was rushing over this river on an elevated bridge Magdalena could see curving dizzily ahead, a skeleton bridge on stilts. In the distance was a city built on a peninsula that must have been Edmundston, her destination. Overhead the sky was still partly darkened, rippled and ridged with cloud. Wind made the train rock. Magdalena bit her lower lip in panic, or was it excitement?—never had she been so far from home, never could she have found her way back. Far to her right the hilly, rocky land fell away and there emerged a vast body of water, choppy and glittering with light. Magdalena rubbed her eyes, she'd never seen anything so beautiful. It seemed to her suddenly that the world was luminous before her; the future lay ahead, welcoming; the world behind, of dismal Black Rock, the airless crowded tenement flats, the endless winter of icy, snow-locked streets, the stink of factories and the soot-blackened walls and air singed with smoke that caused people to cough and choke until tears ran down their cheeks—all that was behind her, diminished

and narrowed and rapidly retreating like a tunnel that has the power to terrify while you are in it but is forgotten as soon as you merge into daylight.

The sun lifted from the horizon and broke through a dense bank of cloud. Shafts of light fell obliquely earthward. To Magdalena's right, the vast stretch of water shifted suddenly to dark greeny-blue, near its surface transparent as cut glass. Magdalena exclaimed in childlike wonder, "Oh, what is that" and a man seated across from her said, proud as if it were his own possession, "That, miss, is the Atlantic Ocean."

The Atlantic Ocean! Magdalena's parents hadn't told her that Edmundston was on the ocean. All Magdalena knew of the Atlantic Ocean were horror tales of her parents' terrible stormy crossing years before her birth, a crossing her pregnant mother had barely survived. Magdalena's brothers and sisters had been imbued all their lives with a sense of the ocean's terror, not its beauty. But the Atlantic Ocean at which Magdalena stared was beautiful—and immense!—like nothing she had ever seen before. She hoped that her great-aunt's house was near the water so that she could stare and stare at it forever.

2.

Now came the time of surprises. Now Magdalena was continually surprised, like a child wandering in a hall of marvels.

Her first surprise was at the Edmundston train station. It had been arranged that she would be met there by her great-aunt's driver and so, stepping down uncertainly from the coach car, struggling with her suitcase and satchel, she glanced quickly about. The confusion and commotion of so many disembarking passengers, so many strangers, threw her into a panic. *What if no one is here? What if this is a mistake, a dream? They have sent me away to be rid of me.* Then she saw a dark-uniformed man with a vizored cap standing on the platform calmly holding a sign—*Kistenmacher*. It took Magdalena a moment to realize that Kistenmacher, a stranger's name, now

referred in some crucial way to her.

At her approach, the uniformed man greeted her, "Miss Schön?" and took her suitcase and satchel from her as if they weighed nothing and walked briskly through the crowded, noisy station to a long black car shiny as a hearse parked outside. In a daze of relief and excitement Magdalena hurried in his wake. Miss Schön! A man had called her Miss Schön! She saw how others watched her with curiosity and respect as the driver opened a rear door of the car and helped her climb inside. Never had Magdalena seen a car so luxurious as this except in photographs; the rear was cushioned in soft gray plush, the windows were so clean and clear, just perceptibly tinted, you would hardly know there were windows at all. Through the traffic-crowded streets of downtown Edmundston they seemed to glide soundlessly as in a dream, and along a wide, windy avenue, and through a park where the grass was stubbled with slow-melting snow, and then they were ascending into a high, hilly residential district of cobblestone streets, clean-swept brick sidewalks, and large, beautiful old houses behind wrought-iron fences and stone walls. Magdalena stared, enchanted. She'd become breathless as if she'd been running. She would have liked to ask the driver many questions but was too shy to speak. For his part, the driver was utterly remote, formal. He'd spoken with her only once as they'd started out, to ask if she was comfortable, and Magdalena had stammered *yes, thank you.* Never in her life had anyone asked her such a question! The driver sat on the other side of a glass partition and she could see only the back of his head, and the back of his vizored cap; there was a rearview mirror above his windshield, but Magdalena could see no face in it.

As the train had entered Edmundston, Magdalena had lost sight of the beautiful glittering ocean; she'd been propelled, as through a tunnel, past a confused succession of factories, warehouses, the rears of run-down houses and tenement buildings disconcertingly similar to those of Black Rock; its speed ever slowing, like a great beast run to earth, the train had passed over a canal of the color of rust. Everywhere was hazy, sepia-tinged smoke or mist she knew would smell and taste like something burnt. But in the residential district in

which her aunt Kistenmacher lived, the air was clear and sparkling as if rain-washed. Even the clouded sky opened to piercing blue as the driver brought them steeply uphill on a cobblestone street named Charter, to their destination.

Magdalena continued to stare as the long shiny black car glided soundlessly into the driveway, past ten-foot stone pillars, one of them marked 1792. The Kistenmacher house was not the largest of the houses Magdalena had been seeing, nor the most impressive; it was a three-story narrow house of aged brick of the hue of pinkish flesh, softened by time; moldering with time; in the facade were crude blocks of granite that had darkened with rain. The roof of the house was unusually steep, with rotted shingles and a prominent chimney listing to one side at its peak. Several of the black-lacquered shutters needed repair, repainting. Winter-damaged ivy clung to the brick like scraggly claws, and lichen grew in the cracked bricks of the elegant front stoop with its tall columns and graceful, if partly rotted portico. But Magdalena felt tears sting her eyes, for she'd never seen, up close, any house so beautiful.

Will I be living here?

I, Magdalena Schön?

The girl whose mother had not loved her; had sent her away.

Magdalena's next surprise was Erica Kistenmacher.

Within minutes of being shown to her room on the third floor, by a woman in a dark dress and a stiff-starched white apron, Magdalena was taken to see her great-aunt. "Mrs. Kistenmacher has been waiting for you since dawn, Miss Schön," the woman said quietly. There was an air in this remark of the most subtle reproach but when Magdalena murmured anxiously that she was sorry, the woman seemed not to hear, nor did she even look at Magdalena. She was of no age that Magdalena could have guessed, older than her own mother; with thin gray hair neatly contained by a hairnet, and a solid, stocky though not plump body, deftly defined motions as she led Magdalena along a corridor without a backward glance. Magdalena had been told that her great-aunt was lonely and required a "companion" and so she had come to imagine the Kistenmacher house as empty except for her great-aunt and now she

saw how erroneous such a notion was. Rich people require servants, she was to be a servant here as well. The woman rapped lightly on a door, and after some delay the door was opened not by Magdalena's great-aunt as she'd naively expected, but by another somber, unsmiling middle-aged woman; a nurse; stockily built too, with a flushed face, in a white uniform and starched white cap over leaden-gray hair. Not greeting the anxious girl but rather scolding Magdalena at once, she said, "Miss Schön, at last, come in, hurry!—so we don't get a draft. And don't tire Mrs. Kistenmacher, she's in a state of nerves as it is." Magdalena stepped into a room so airless and overheated it took her breath away, and the nurse quickly shut the door behind her. It was a spacious, high-ceilinged bedroom so crowded with furniture and fabrics, vases and glassware, glittering figurines, candlestick holders, scattered books, mirrors with old glass that subtly distorted the reflections they framed, that Magdalena had difficulty seeing her great-aunt until the woman whispered, "My dear! Come!" On a divan in a patch of wan sunlight, covered by a satin quilt, there lay a white-skinned, doll-like old woman with one of her arms tremulously lifted, her fingers stretched in Magdalena's direction and her face creased in joyous expectation.

Many times, Magdalena's father and mother had spoken of the young woman Erica Schön who'd traveled to Boston from her home in southern Germany to work as a nanny for a rich family; who, at the age of nineteen, had married a much older man, a widower; they'd moved to Edmundston, Massachusetts. For years, Erica Schön was out of contact with her family; she'd married defiantly, outside the Roman Catholic Church. A photograph of Magdalena's father as a boy, taken with his youthful aunt, many years ago, was all Magdalena had had to help form her image of her great-aunt Kistenmacher; but the young woman in the photograph with her crimped hair, almost-pretty face, long nose and intelligent, squinting eyes bore no resemblance at all to the woman on the divan. Somehow, Magdalena was not prepared for her great-aunt to be so old. Stammering a greeting, Magdalena took the woman's lifted hand—what thin, icy fingers!—thinking *She's a stranger. It's a*

mistake. She will send me away, like my mother.

But the old woman was delighted with Magdalena, saying in her hoarse, hissing voice that she recognized her at once, for Magdalena had the "Schön face"—a heart-shaped face—"But so much prettier than most of us!" Though the frowning nurse hovered near, Magdalena was urged to sit on a stool close beside the old woman, who gazed at her hungrily, and continued to squeeze her hand. With dismay Magdalena saw that her great-aunt's clouded left eye was fixed upon something over Magdalena's shoulder; the entire left side of her face was frozen, in an attitude of pained exactitude; her left arm lay limp beside her, the childlike fingers curled, useless. *Your aunt Kistenmacher has had a stroke, she must be fearful of her death. If you are good to her, she may be generous to us.* Yet Magdalena hadn't much idea of what a stroke was, nor had her parents explained. Magdalena surmised within a few minutes that the poor woman was nearly blind in her "good" eye; and very hard of hearing; it seemed unlikely that she could walk unassisted, or perhaps at all; her voice was gone, or she hadn't the strength to project it beyond a rasping whisper. Most disconcerting was the way in which, not knowing what she did, she occasionally interjected a word or a nonsensical syllable ("eh," "yi") into her speech. She smelled of sweet talcum and something harshly acidic, like medicine. How pale her skin, papery white and so thin Magdalena could see the delicate blue veins quivering beneath like nerves; her face was finely creased, as if it had been many times crumpled and released, like silk. Yet she trembled with excitement, thrilled with Magdalena as a child with a new playmate. Magdalena couldn't understand her completely but she seemed to be asking Magdalena to speak of her home, her family, most of all her father, but when Magdalena began speaking she interrupted her repeatedly, smiling with half her face, her bright eye fixed upon Magdalena's face. With her groping right hand she touched Magdalena's hair, stroked the thick braided coils at the sides of Magdalena's head; she'd once worn her hair like that, she seemed to be saying. She touched Magdalena's face—the "Schön face"— and drew her fingertips across Magdalena's lips. Magdalena had to suppress the impulse to shiver, though the room was very warm.

"Do you know me, dear? I am your Aunt Erica," she said, "please call me 'Aunt Erica,' dear," and Magdalena said, uncertainly, "—Aunt Erica.'" The words sounded false in her mouth, as if the syllables were wrongly accented. Eagerly Aunt Erica cupped her right hand to her ear whispering, "Eh? Eh? What?" so Magdalena repeated in a louder voice, her face burning, "'Aunt Erica.'" The frowning nurse in white had positioned herself behind the divan and was staring at Magdalena with open hostility. But Aunt Erica was squeezing Magdalena's fingers in hers, and smiling with half her mouth, so pleadingly that Magdalena felt her heart ache with love; unless it was pity; that raw, exhausting emotion she felt for the crippled people, usually men, she saw on the streets of Black Rock, victims of accidents in the great iron foundry in which her own father and older brothers worked. The elderly invalid was whispering hoarsely what sounded like, "I knew you would come to me one day, dear child, I had faith you hadn't abandoned me like the rest of the Schöns," and in the midst of these words a nonsensical outcry *Yi!* like a cry of pain, and Magdalena, frightened, mutely nodded, for how else to respond; her aunt's frail fingers gripped her own much stronger fingers tight; the stale, sweetish-sour odor was overpowering; and when Aunt Erica began to cry, sobs racking her limp body, Magdalena began to cry, too; for she was so tenderhearted, the sight of another's tears always provoked her own.

"—I'm so h-happy to be here, Aunt Erica—th-thank you for inviting me—"

But at this point the nurse stepped brusquely forward as if she'd been waiting for just such a development. Adjusting the quilt higher on the invalid's shoulders, and scolding, "Now you see, Mrs. Kistenmacher, didn't I warn you?—a night of bad nerves, and now you've made yourself feverish over this girl you don't even know."

What a surprise to Magdalena Schön; for the first time in her sixteen years she had a room to herself.

On the third floor of the beautiful old Federal-style house on Charter Street, Edmundston, with a view of the river approximately a mile away, to the south; and, if she leaned out her window,

craning her neck, of the ocean several miles to the east, a vaporous strip of light alternately silver, blue-green, plum-colored, black. She knew this was the fabled "Atlantic Ocean" though she hadn't truly seen it since the morning the train had brought her into Edmundston; a dreamlike morning itself now rapidly retreating into the past.

There were hours when Magdalena was lonely in her neat, clean, attractive room at the top of the Kistenmacher house; but she was not homesick. She did not believe she would ever be homesick for the crowded rooms of Black Rock.

Though sometimes in the night by lamplight she read her prayer book, which had been a gift for her confirmation in the Roman Catholic faith from her parents, her lips silently and urgently moving. Sometimes she fell asleep with her rosary entwined in her fingers and woke in the morning startled to discover the crystal beads stretched snakelike across her throat.

Her Aunt Erica did not attend church of any kind, having the excuse of being an invalid. "If God wants to seek me out, He knows where I am," the elderly woman one day whispered to Magdalena, with a wink of her good eye. Magdalena laughed at such witty boldness though she was inwardly shocked—a little.

Perhaps, sending her off to Edmundston, so far away, Magdalena's parents had tacitly assumed she would drift away from the faith of the Schöns. Not once, she realized, had they cautioned her about seeking out a church where she could attend mass. *Neither one of them loved me, they sent me away.* But why was Magdalena dry-eyed? Her heart beat rapidly with another kind of excitement.

The tall, narrow, lattice-paned windows of Magdalena's room were the most wonderful thing about the room, emitting light in the early morning from the direction of the river. Even as she slept this warm light entered her sleep, beckoning to her. *Wake! Wake! Hurry! Come!* She seemed to hear a voice lifted in song, unknown to her; neither male nor female; clear as struck glass, unspeakably beautiful. *Magdalena, come!* In the white lace-trimmed cotton nightgown her aunt had provided for her, barefoot, her waist-long hair in loose dense wavy coils down her back, Magdalena tiptoed to a window to

gaze out in wonder. These spring days, the sky was likely to be brilliantly blue, or layered in fine-etched clouds of subtle gradations of silver; the sun shone warmly, or a light rain fell, or a heavy rain buffeted by winds and laced with lightning. How new, how fresh, every morning, how Magdalena's eyes stared! Not wishing to recall how for all of her life until just recently, five hundred miles westward in Black Rock she'd shared sleeping quarters with others, often a bed with a sister, or two sisters; the windows of the ground-floor tenement flat in which the Schöns lived, impossible to keep clean, looked out grudgingly upon a weather-stained ruin of a wall next door, or upon a potholed, muddy street, or a trash-filled vacant lot; there had been nothing to see, and so she had trained herself to see nothing. Here in the Kistenmacher house she was obliged to share her room with no one, a pretty girl's room of filmy white curtains, white walls and white satin fabrics; she was obliged to share her thoughts with no one. She would not be judged, she would not be found wanting, she would not be scolded, she would not be slapped, she would not be the object of family pity—*Leave Magdalena alone, she can't help it.*

From every angle at her window in the early morning light she saw a beautiful sight, or a curious sight, or an intriguing sight. Gazing out upon cobblestone streets steeply falling away from view like streets in a child's storybook, the cobblestones often glistening with rain fallen during the night; one morning in early April she saw flocks of robins bathing themselves in puddles in the street, and heard the high, sweet, many-times-repeated cries of other birds she could not recognize, with crested heads and olive-grey feathers; she heard the curious clawlike cries of seagulls; she studied the roofs of neighboring houses, all of them as old as the Kistenmacher house, and most of them considerably larger and in better repair, and she wondered at the lives within; her eyes moved upon tall handsome chimneys of brick and stone; and tall, graceful, green-budding trees she believed to be elms; and in the near distance, downhill from Charter Street, there were several church spires that gleamed fiercely in the sun and even on overcast days were luminous as if lit from within by their own secret light. And there was the river, and the

bridge that spanned the river, partly obscured from Magdalena's view by buildings; the bridge that drew Magdalena's eye again, and again. The river, she'd learned, was the Merrimack River, and the bridge was the Merrimack Bridge; beyond the bridge was a part of the city known as "lower Edmundston" or simply "lower town"—the waterfront area of tenement buildings, aged buildings (like the Old Custom House) dating to colonial times, warehouses and fisheries, docks, boats of all sizes and types from small fishing boats to ocean freighters. All of the female occupants of the house on Charter Street, including even the invalid mistress of the house, were prone to speak of "lower town" with an air of unease, as if "lower town" might be inhabited by dangerous persons. Magdalena had the idea none of them had ever visited it.

(Yet hadn't Aunt Erica's husband Mr. Kistenmacher, deceased now for eighteen years, had dealings as a broker with shipping lines that operated out of Edmundston harbor? Of the meager facts about the man that Magdalena had gathered, this was one that intrigued her.)

§

In this time of surprises the most remarkable and in some ways the most disconcerting was Magdalena's immediate discovery that, in her great-aunt's house, as niece and "companion," she had so little to do.

"Aunt Erica, *I* can do that," Magdalena said eagerly, at their first meal in a small formal dining room, when the maid Hannah appeared out of the pantry to clear away plates; but Aunt Erica patted Magdalena's wrist as one might subdue a headstrong child, shaping with her lips the admonishment "No."

"But, Aunt Erica, at home—"

The older woman squeezed Magdalena's wrist to silence her, so that somber, sturdy Hannah in her dark dress and stiff-starched white apron wouldn't hear. Her hoarse, cracked voice was almost, fierce—"This is your home, dear child, and there are new rules here."

It stunned Magdalena to realize she wasn't to be a servant after

all.

Of course she'd assumed, as her parents had assumed, that she would be "helping out" her aunt. Of all her sisters and brothers, Magdalena was the most cooperative, good-natured and uncomplaining about household chores; her happiest memories of home were preparing meals with her mother, rolling and cutting noodle dough, baking brown bread; even laundry day which involved hours of tedious back-aching labor, including hanging wet, heavy men's coveralls, denim jackets and work-shirts, sheets, quilts, blankets on a straining rope in the back yard, had not fazed her. Magdalena had been a strong, capable worker even as a child; she'd liked to take orders from her mother and older sisters because it was a way of pleasing them. A way of being loved.

Now in the house on Charter Street she was "Miss Schön" to the real servants. Apart from cleaning her own room and washing out her clothes, which she insisted upon doing, she had no tasks other than being a companion to her aunt, and this involved only a few hours of the day, depending upon Aunt Erica's health and disposition. Magdalena sat with her and talked, or listened to the older-woman speak in her rambling, disconnected way; sometimes Magdalena read poetry, mainly verse by women poets of whom she'd never heard, or the Bible; though gazing at her intently with her good eye, Aunt Erica would soon fall asleep, her face slack and mouth wetly agape in an expression of childlike surrender. Magdalena didn't know whether to continue reading, or tiptoe quietly away; she guessed that her aunt took comfort from her mere presence and could hear her words even while asleep. *If I have the power to make Aunt Erica happy*, she thought. Once, while Magdalena was reading poetry, her aunt fell into a doze and began to hum in a singsong rhythm, the right side of her pale, wrinkled, doll-like face suffused with tenderness. Without opening her eyes, Aunt Erica murmured, "The music of your voice, child. My own childhood in it."

Magdalena doubted this: she was an American-born girl. Except by an accident of family, she was not "German."

At such times the dour-faced nurse, whose name sounded like

"Helge," remained close by in an adjoining room, knitting; the rapid click of her needles sounded, to Magdalena's sensitive ear, censorious. Except for a few hours a week, Helge seemed always to be on duty; she was devoted to her patient, if often exasperated with her, as if Mrs. Kistenmacher was a willful child who needed constant watching. Helge had taken up residence in the Kistenmacher house after Mrs. Kistenmacher's stroke nearly two years before. Clearly she was jealous of Magdalena and resented her presence in the household, her place in the invalid's affections, and Magdalena supposed she could not blame her. Not once had Helge smiled at Magdalena, nor would she call her "Magdalena" as the girl had asked. Aunt Erica would embarrass them both by addressing Helge in her rasping, urgent voice, "Isn't she pretty, Helge? She's come to me—I knew she would. Do you like her hair? I wore my hair like this, too—when I was a girl." The nurse's slitted eyes moved onto Magdalena for the briefest fraction of a second; her nostrils pinched; she could not be induced to reply to such ridiculous remarks but said, with dignity, "Well. It's time for your nap, Mrs. Kistenmacher. You've made yourself feverish, Dr. Meinke will have to be told." Between the nurse and her invalid patient was the figure of the formidable Dr. Meinke, who came to the house on Charter Street to examine Mrs. Kistenmacher every ten or twelve days.

Sometimes Magdalena had breakfast with her aunt, and sometimes a midday meal called "dinner" at 2 p.m.; these meals were served in the smaller of the two dining rooms downstairs, or, if she was feeling unwell, in Aunt Erica's airless, overheated bedroom on the second floor. Walking with a cane and assisted by Helge and Magdalena, Aunt Erica insisted upon being "up"—"up and dressed"—as often as her strength allowed; she could not manage stairs, of course, but the house was equipped with an elevator. This was an alarmingly creaky cagelike structure that could hold no more than two people comfortably. Required to ride with her aunt in the elevator, while Helge grimly trod the stairs, Magdalena felt, suffocated, panicked. *What if we're trapped in here together? What if we fall?* It was the first elevator in which Magdalena had ever ridden and she'd heard that terrible accidents happened sometimes,

elevators stuck between floors or falling down shafts, crushing their occupants. By the time the little cage creaked to a stop, and Magdalena fumbled for the latticework door to unlatch it and swing it open, and help her aunt shuffle out, she was breathless and trembling.

Aunt Erica whispered, "Thank you, dear! You're so kind." Gripping Magdalena's wrist with her claw-fingers.

Meals shared with her aunt were awkward for Magdalena because the older woman ate so slowly. Dinner, invariably a hot, heavy meal in the German style, might last more than an hour, at the end of which Aunt Erica would have eaten only a few morsels. At these times Magdalena was acutely conscious of the nurse Helge hovering just outside the door, and of Hannah in the pantry, waiting for her mistress to ring a little silver bell to summon her (Hannah also prepared meals, a duty she took very seriously. Magdalena had several times offered to help her but had always been rejected: "Miss Schön, I am Mrs. Kistenmacher's cook"). On Mondays there came to the house on Charter Street a husky red-haired woman of about forty named Mavis who did laundry and heavy cleaning, and this woman was friendly with Hannah, who hired her, and often Magdalena could hear the two whispering and laughing together, in Magdalena's very presence. One day at dinner, Magdalena was miserable hearing Hannah and Mavis in the pantry, peeking through the swinging door at her, and under the pretext of seeking out a glass of fresh ice water for her aunt, before the older woman could ring her little bell, Magdalena stormed out into the pantry and confronted her startled tormentors—"Why don't you like me? What have I ever done to you?" Tears brimmed in the girl's eyes but the women turned away embarrassed and sullen.

Following that, relations between Magdalena and the household staff would be more strained than ever.

Aunt Erica, aware of far more that happened under her roof than one might imagine of one with sight and hearing deficiencies, scolded Magdalena for such behavior—"Child, it isn't fitting." Her admonishments were playful but accompanied by light slaps on Magdalena's wrist clearly meant to evoke more solid blows.

§

On the second Sunday of Magdalena's residence at the house on Charter Street, her aunt invited a number of people for "afternoon tea". Magdalena was surprised to learn that Erica Kistenmacher knew so many people. What a flurry of faces, names, handshakes! The majority of the visitors were women of her aunt's age, widows like her, and neighbors; but there were gentlemen as well, former business associates of the late Mr. Kistenmacher, and legal and financial advisors of Mrs. Kistenmacher; and the formidable Dr. Meinke, white-haired and garrulous. Among the guests was a youngish man of about twenty-seven, a junior associate of Mrs. Kistenmacher's accountant, whom eventually Magdalena Schön would marry; but, at the time of their first meeting, Magdalena scarcely heard his name in her confusion, and scarcely saw his face, and forgot him, as she forgot most of the others, almost immediately afterward.

3.

Now the day is over
Night is drawing nigh
Shadows of the evening…

From her room at the top of the brick house on Charter Street, Magdalena Schön looked out restlessly upon the mysterious city of Edmundston. Repeatedly her attention was drawn to the Merrimack River, glittering like a snake's scales, and the Merrimack Bridge that seemed almost to beckon to her. Now the weather had turned warmer, now the evenings were longer, she dared to open her windows wide, and leaned out, breathing in an intoxicating fragrance of lilac laced with fresh, chill gusts of air from the ocean. Her eyes were widened, sharpened. It seemed to her that she could see vividly a long distance; in hazy-gloomy Black Rock where the air

was singed with smoke and fumes from the iron foundry, she'd hardly been able to see a quarter mile. And how acutely she could hear!—sounds from miles away.

Crystal-like chimes of a church's bell. And another bell deeper, more solemnly tolling like a great, ponderous heart.

A rougher, more rhythmic music—an accordion?

A beautiful voice, lifted in song. Difficult to determine at this distance if it was male or female. *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh…* The voice was blown on the wind, now distinct, now fading. She leaned out her window dangerously far, cupping a hand to hen-ear like her deaf Aunt Erica. How exquisite, how beautiful this music, how it called to her: *Magdalena, come! Hurry!*

These sounds were wafted to her from the direction of the Merrimack Bridge, and beyond: "lower Edmundston," "lower town."

§

"Just for a walk. Just for an hour."

So Magdalena told herself, late one afternoon when the commingled smells of lilac and the sea made her blood rush so she felt almost faint with longing. And her pretty shimmering-white room at the top of the house on Charter Street seemed to her a box, a cage, suffocating.

"I won't go far, I promise. I won't get lost—"

It would be Magdalena's first venture outside of the house on Charter Street since her arrival weeks before. Out of the high, hilly residential district of dignified old houses and elegant tree-lined cobblestone streets. Out of the fair, blossom-fragrant air of upper Edmundston and into the denser, more brackish air of lower Edmundston. Magdalena had spent more time than usual with Aunt Erica that day, both in the morning and in the early afternoon following dinner; now she was free for what remained of the day, and eager to have her adventure. Draping a russet-red silk shawl around her shoulders, one of her aunt's numerous gifts; leaving her head bare, despite the wind and the uncertain spring sky, alternately bright with sun and roiling with thunder-bearing clouds. She should

have waited for a calmer day, she knew, but her pulse raced, she was filled with longing, yearning, for—what?

"Just for a walk, really. I promise not to get lost."

Like a guilty child she was explaining herself to Aunt Erica, who, if she knew, would have disapproved. *Not fitting, child! Not fit for a lady, to walk on foot into lower town!*

But Aunt Erica had retired for the day; even now Aunt Erica was napping in her room that smelled of talcum, medicine and mildew, blinds drawn tight against the afternoon sun. Even as Magdalena had been reading to her from the Bible, the Book of Psalms, the old woman lapsed by degrees into a light, snoring doze, her papery-white doll's face empty of expression. Magdalena had gazed upon her aunt with sympathy, yet horror. She'd calculated that Erica Kistenmacher wasn't so very old—in her late sixties. And you could see that once, not so long ago, she'd been a youthful attractive woman with eyes, a sweet mouth. Magdalena shivered despite the overheated room thinking *I will never be so old! I will never be you, Aunt Erica!*

A grandfather clock in the hall was quietly chiming the hour of five o'clock as, stealthy as a cat, Magdalena descended the stairs from the third floor to the second, and from the second floor to the first. Except, in the foyer, at the front door, she had difficulty working the lock. Glimpsing Magdalena as she passed in the hall, Hannah called out, startled, "Miss Schön! Where are you going?" Magdalena said, guiltily, "Just for a walk, Hannah. In the neighborhood." Hannah approached, her hands folded in her stiff-starched white apron; she was frowning as if she had more to say, but did not speak at first. Magdalena's cheeks burned pleasurably—it was the first time Hannah had spoken so directly to her, and looked her full in the face. Magdalena said, "I won't get lost, I promise. I won't go far." Hannah hesitated, biting her thin lower lip; then murmured, "Here, miss. I'll get the lock. You'll have to ring to be let back in, you know. This door is always double-bolted."

So Magdalena escaped the house on Charter Street, walking downhill in the fresh warm lilac-intoxicated air, trusting to instinct to make her way toward the Merrimack Bridge. Noting how, before

long, the houses she passed were smaller, less "historic"; there were woodframe bungalows, row houses, shops and stores and a wide, traffic-heavy street called Fayette, upon which streetcars clattered. This street led to the Merrimack Bridge which Magdalena crossed with some hesitation, for she had to walk on a narrow, mesh-floored pedestrian walk of a kind she'd never seen before, beneath which, all too visibly, the river rushed, not luminous or glittering in sunlight but slate-colored, oily-looking. How harsh the river smelled, close up—there was no fragrance of lilacs here. And how noisy the waves, not rhythmic, slapping at the stained foundations of the bridge. Magdalena crossed with a rapidly beating heart, wondering if she should be doing this; so far from the beautiful old house on Charter Street, and from the safety of her window on the third floor; there, she'd had no idea of how broad, how windswept, how formidable a presence the river was; across the distance, the Merrimack Bridge had looked almost delicate, its vertical girders like lacework; up close of course they were heavy, coarse, and badly rusted; and traffic rumbled past noisily, in a continuous stream of enormous trucks, delivery vans, automobiles out of which the eyes of strangers moved upon Magdalena bareheaded in the wind, wrapped in a russet-red silk shawl, hurrying on foot in a place where few pedestrians walked. *Hey! Girl! Want a ride, girl?* Magdalena didn't hear, staring down transfixed at the mesh walkway before her and the river rushing beneath like destiny.

Noises on the bridge were so distracting that Magdalena no longer heard any music; by the time she reached the other side of the river, panting, wiping grit from her eyes, adjusting her windblown hair and clothing, she'd forgotten the music; and, beginning to hear it again as she turned onto a street of row houses and small commercial shops, she was surprised and gladdened. Not a single music but numerous musics, predominantly now the rollicking rhythmic sound of an organ grinder, which made her smile, and led her into a neighborhood of crowded brownstone buildings in which tenants leaned out of upstairs windows shouting gaily to one another in the street, and rough, dark-haired but beautiful children played boisterously in the street, and men in shirtsleeves sat

smoking in front of their shops, and gathered at corners where there were taverns. How like Havass Street in Black Rock—Magdalena smiled to see a greengrocer's shop, and a baker's, and a tailor's, and a butcher's; she shut her eyes as she passed the butcher's, smelling familiar odors of raw meat, blood, sawdust. Often she'd been sent on errands to the butcher's and had had to endure the butcher's rough teasing, and the sights of things in his shop, shiny, squirmy, glistening, oozing blood, her eyes refused to see. But the language or languages Magdalena was hearing spoken here were not familiar to her, not English, not German, not Hungarian though similar to these languages. Nor were most of the people fair-skinned like her but darker in complexion, or olive-pale, with black hair, gleaming black eyes. And how they looked at her, the men's eyes cast like nets at her. At an outdoor cafe men sat at tables playing cards, smoking and drinking and talking loudly among themselves and as Magdalena passed by on the sidewalk she was aware of their voices dropping to murmurs, or silence; and, in her wake, resuming again, with an intensity she didn't want to consider. She noted how couples walked openly here, arms around each other's waists—a sight you would never see in Black Rock.

The source of the rollicking organ music was in a side street narrow as an alley, where an elderly white-haired man sat on a stoop playing a hand organ for a small gathering of appreciative listeners, mostly children. How happy, how thrilling, the organ grinder's music—there was nothing like it in Black Rock!

Yet Magdalena walked restlessly on, drawn by the smell of water, and found herself in a riverfront area of warehouses, docks, fishing boats; for some fascinated minutes she watched men gutting fish on the dock, and wondered that she wasn't repelled; everywhere was a strong garbagey odor of fish. Yet she thought, standing at the end of a dock, shading her eyes staring into the infinite distance, *I can breathe here.*

Still Magdalena walked on, hearing the mysterious words *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh…* borne on a gust of wind. Soon she found herself in a neighborhood of very old, mostly abandoned buildings with part-collapsed roofs, and thistles and young trees

growing everywhere in profusion; no one appeared to be living here now. Over the street was a curious carved archway across which monkeylike figures scuttled daringly, giggling; seeing Magdalena, they whistled and hooted at her, and vanished. Children?

As Magdalena stared upward, a handful of pebbles fell at her feet. She hoped they hadn't been meant for her.

Quickly Magdalena walked on, climbing a steep hill at the top of which was a very old church made of crude, weatherworn stone; the singing seemed to be issuing from the rear of this church, so Magdalena hiked into the churchyard, a tangle of wild rose and briars amid which grave markers tilted at crazy angles. On the markers were chiseled words too faint to be discerned but the numerals were clearer—1712, 1723, 1693. Magdalena stared. So long ago! She had been born in 1912. It made her feel dizzy to contemplate the emptiness before she'd come into being, like a geometry problem of incalculable complexity.

The singer was close by, voice lifting in pure, heartrending sound. A tenor voice. Singing a church hymn, obviously a Protestant hymn, not known to Magdalena. *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh…* There was a shadowy recess where the church walls formed a three-sided rectangle with the crumbling stone wall of the churchyard; or perhaps it was an actual entrance into the interior of the church; the singer stood just inside, oddly in the dark, practicing, rehearsing. A young man, Magdalena thought. She strained to see him without drawing too close, her heart beating quickly. *Shadows of the evening… steal across the sky.* There was a pause, and a sound of hoarse breathing, and again the song resumed, at the same pitch and in the same tempo. *Now the day…* This time there seemed to be a just-perceptible strain to the singer's voice, an undercurrent of agitation, though it was no less beautiful than before, and perhaps even more beautiful. Magdalena listened, transfixed. She seemed to know that the young tenor would be handsome, dark-haired like the men she'd been seeing in lower Edmundston, with bright dark eyes, thick-lashed eyes. Yet she was fearful of revealing herself to him, even to walk casually across the churchyard so that she could, by glancing sideways, peer into the church. He might abruptly cease his

singing if he knew he was being heard. And Magdalena had no business in the churchyard of a Protestant church, after all.

But she listened for a daringly long time, taking care to keep herself hidden, until at last she crept stealthily away, for it was nearing dusk.

Thinking, as she made her way back to Charter Street, to the high, hilly residential neighborhood above Edmundston and to the massive front door of her aunt's house at which she had to ring the bell to be admitted, *Who is he? What does he look like? Why didn't I try to see him, at least?*

4.

So it happened that Magdalena Schön fell in love. Though she was never to acknowledge the fact.

Hearing the singer's seductive voice not only as she stood leaning out her window lifting her face to the fresh, gusty air, but as she slept in her bed of white linens, white satin and wool; and during the day, at odd, unpredictable moments elsewhere in her aunt's house; sometimes even in Aunt Erica's presence as the old woman hoarsely, excitedly chattered. So faint as to be almost inaudible, yet unmistakable. *Now the day is over… Shadows of the evening…* She who had not once felt homesick for Black Rock, for the crowded rooms of her childhood, nor even for her parents, sisters and brothers she believed she had loved, now felt a heart-longing for lower Edmundston; for the Merrimack River and the Merrimack Bridge and the waterfront docks and the ancient weather-stained church with its crazily tilting grave markers and the faceless singer in the church whose surpassingly beautiful voice haunted her like the very beat, beat, beat of her blood. Again and again he sang his utterly simple verse. *Now the day is over… Now the day is over…*

One afternoon Aunt Erica broke off her rambling, not very coherent chatter to smile at Magdalena puckishly with half her mouth, and exclaimed, "Dear child, are you thinking about your family? Are you lonely for your family?" And Magdalena roused

herself, with a vague smile, as if not knowing where she was exactly, and said, "Oh, Aunt Erica, he has such a high, clear, strong voice. It's a man's voice, but not like one you would ever hear."

Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh…
Magdalena, come!

Another afternoon of gusty clouds, distant music. Magdalena slipped away from the house on Charter Street, and retraced her steps to lower Edmundston; to the ancient church where again the mysterious singer was practicing his hymn. This time Magdalena saw that there was no sign on the front of the church; no indication of its denomination; the stone cross on its roof, crude and weather-stained, yet possessing its own primitive beauty, had partly collapsed, forming hardly more than a T. Moss grew in rakish patches on the roof of rotted shingles. There was but a single window in the building, deep set in the stained stone wall. The church must have been very poor, in such need of repair. Yet the tenor was singing as before, more deliberately perhaps, as if determined to perfect his song. *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh… Shadows of the evening steal across the sky.* Magdalena heard the agitation, the passion in the voice not discernible at a distance; when the singer paused, she could hear him panting for breath. She dared to approach the alcove, her heart beating very hard, and saw at last the shadowy figure within. It was indeed a young man; a handsome young man, or so he appeared in the indistinct light; he was standing at the front of the little church near the altar, his body tense; his hands gripped into fists; tendons standing out in his neck. She felt a sensation of profound yearning pass over her, a swooning sensation of a kind she'd never before felt, as if the very earth beneath her feet were shifting; as if all volition had been drained from her. She thought I must help him!

As the young man sang he moved his head restlessly from side to side, and ran his fingers through his hair, which was, as Magdalena had envisioned, black hair; thick, lustrous black hair. His skin was olive-pale, rather waxy; despite his beautiful voice, there

was something unhealthy about him; he blinked his eyes repeatedly, as if trying to clear his vision. Magdalena came closer, waiting for him to see her. Her heart was pounding so violently she believed she might faint, yet she couldn't turn back. *I must, I must help him. That's why I have come.* There was a rich, ripe smell of decay inside the church, an earthy, stale smell that contrasted sharply with the smell of the outdoors and the fresh gusty air blown from the east. When the young man paused in his singing, licking his lips, Magdalena said hesitantly, "Excuse me, but—what a beautiful song. I've never heard such a beautiful song."

The young man turned to stare at Magdalena, or in her direction. Clearly he was distracted, confused; he'd believed himself alone, and she had intruded. For a moment Magdalena feared he would ask her to leave, or turn away in anger himself; but finally he smiled, a faint, hurried smile, and returned to his singing. He was standing alone at the altar, his chin somewhat raised and his head slightly back, the tendons in his slender neck prominent as before, and his hands shut into fists. Magdalena saw his body tremble as he sang. *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh…* Magdalena came closer, seeing that the young man gazed at her as he sang, through his dark, thick lashes; she thought, perhaps, he was singing to her now, as if speaking to her through these mysterious, exquisite words. For some minutes he continued to sing, and Magdalena stood transfixed listening. For now the song was yet more beautiful and seductive. Magdalena, too, stood with her hands shut into fists; a pulse beat hard in her left temple, as in the singer's; and another pulse, an artery, beat in her throat, as in the singer's. Magdalena had draped her aunt's russet-red silk shawl around her shoulders before setting off to lower Edmundston, but the wind had blown it loose; she had a vague awareness that her meticulously plaited hair was coming undone. So, too, the singer shook hair out of his eyes, and when he finished his verse Magdalena saw that his pale, intense face was damp with perspiration; his skin appeared almost translucent. Without needing to be summoned, Magdalena boldly hurried to him, a stranger, and standing on tiptoe wiped his heated face with a handkerchief; a freshly laundered white linen handkerchief her aunt

had given her, which she then carefully folded and returned to her pocket. "Thank you," the singer murmured almost inaudibly; without smiling; and began to sing again, and again completed his verse, though on a somewhat strained note; or so it seemed to Magdalena, who watched his face anxiously and saw his expression of dissatisfaction. In a vague, impatient gesture, as of self-loathing, the singer indicated his throat as if meaning he was thirsty; his throat was dry, parched. Magdalena understood at once, saying, "Wait!" and hurried out of the church to find drinking water… for hadn't she noticed, on her way into the churchyard, an old stone well amid the tall grasses, with a crank handle and a wooden pitcher? She located the well, and leaned over it to sniff the water within, which was so deep inside the earth she couldn't see even a glimmer of a reflection. How icy-cold, how pure and good the water smelled; and how eagerly Magdalena drew a pitcher of it up, with her strong, capable arms, to bring to the singer awaiting her inside the church.

He drank from the pitcher thirsty as an animal, his eyes nearly shut in a kind of ecstasy. Handing it then back to Magdalena, and indicating that she, too, should drink, since water remained; and so she did; and never had she tasted water so delicious, feeling as before her very soul swoon as if all volition had been sucked from her. How happy she was! The happiest she'd been since leaving Black Rock, since leaving her mother's kitchen where her joy had been in doing as she was instructed, and doing it well. She saw the singer gaze upon her with gratitude and interest as he murmured, again almost inaudibly, "Thank you." Magdalena smiled, blushing; she could think of nothing to say to him except, "Will you be singing here—on Sunday? Are you practicing for Sunday?" The young man smiled sadly at her, with a shrug of his shoulders; he was tall, with a proud, erect posture, yet thin; his shoulders were thin; he spoke in a lowered, hoarse voice, as if he half feared being overheard by someone other than Magdalena, and half invited it, "I must sing, I have no choice." Magdalena wasn't sure she'd heard correctly, and so could think of no reply. Turning from her, the singer began again, now pacing about in front of the altar, with more vigor, self-

assurance. *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh… Shadows of the evening steal across the sky.* Surely this time he'd sung it perfectly? Surely now he could go on to the next verse? But no, the singer shrugged again irritably, and brushed his hair out of his eyes with a violent gesture. He said, in his speaking voice which was so curiously flat, hoarse, hushed, as if his throat hurt him, "I am happy only when I am singing, and singing exhausts me."

Magdalena found herself sitting in a pew at the front of the church, not noticing that the pew was broken, filthy with cobwebs. In a state of ecstasy she listened as the singer continued his painstaking practicing, grim and determined yet singing with passion; his eyes were very black as if all pupil, fixed and glassy, turned inward. At last he broke off again, a gleaming film of perspiration on his pale face, and Magdalena hurried to wipe it away. He caught hold of her wrist and held her, and said, "How kind you are! What is your name?" and Magdalena told him, and he said, "A beautiful name. My name is—" speaking a sibilant word that Magdalena didn't catch, and was too shy to ask him to repeat. Magdalena said, "Where do you live?" and the young man said, with a twitch of his lips, "I live here," and it wasn't clear to her what he meant—for surely he didn't live in the church. Or possibly he'd spoken ironically. He asked where she lived, and Magdalena bit her lower lip, and said, "I don't have any home really. My mother sent me away, she didn't love me." Unexpectedly she confided in this stranger, for he was gazing at her with such compassion; tears filled her eyes; she heard herself saying, "There were too many mouths to feed, I think. It would not have been possible for any of us to die." What a strange thing to say! Yet the young man was not surprised, frowning, saying, "Yes, it is the way of all nature—too many mouths. Which is why I sing, Magdalena." Again, Magdalena didn't understand; but dared not reveal her ignorance. The young man said, "Will you stay with me awhile? Will you help me, Magdalena?" and Magdalena said eagerly, "Help you? How?" and he said, "Stay with me! I have only a little way to go, to get it right." And so he sang again, more passionately than ever; and Magdalena listened enchanted. For now, surely, he'd perfected the verse? She could not

imagine anything more beautiful. But he broke off, and shook his head sadly; Magdalena offered him the pitcher of water, in which some remained, forgetting that she'd drunk from it; he waved it aside without seeming to see. He said, "I began to sing because I wanted to sing, and now I sing because I am made to sing." Magdalena said, naively, "But who makes you?"—for she could see no one else anywhere near. The church was empty except for the singer and herself; the churchyard was empty, with a look of abandonment and desolation; beyond the part-collapsed stone wall of the churchyard there was a steep drop, and rocky land below obscured by mist, and the sound of restless, choppy waves— the ocean, so close? But no human figures, no human inhabitants. Only gulls circling above, emitting cries of hunger. The singer was pacing about before the altar, though scarcely aware of his surroundings; repeatedly he found his way blocked by a pew, or the communion rail or the minister's pulpit, and so moved blindly around it, frowning, his mouth twitching. As much to himself as to Magdalena he said, "My father sang, and his father; it was their fate, too. They died young—it's said. I never knew them of course. They died of burst arteries. In their throats." He stroked his slender, pale throat; gently he stroked the sinewy blue artery that Magdalena had noticed swelling as he'd sung. "It's said to be a curse. But I don't believe in curses." Magdalena shivered, for there was a rising wind; by quick degrees it was growing dusk; though now the season was well into spring, and the evenings were longer. She said, "How can I help you?" and the young man said, with a sudden boyish, hopeful smile, "Sing with me, Magdalena!"

Magdalena was astonished. Sing? With such a gifted singer?

"But—"

"Yes, you must! Then my strength will be doubled."

So, shyly, reluctantly, Magdalena tried to sing. She, who had never sung before in her life except privately to herself, or in the company of sisters, singing with this commanding young man as he clasped her hand in his and gazed into her eyes. *Now the day is over… Night is drawing nigh…* But Magdalena's voice was too weak; the young man broke off so that they could begin again. *Now the day is*

over… Night is drawing… But again something was wrong, Magdalena's cheeks burned with shame of her breathy, thin, girl's voice; though she tried to sing with as much accuracy and strength as she could summon, hers was a wholly untrained voice, lacking pitch, solidity, beauty. Oh, most of all beauty! The young man winced as if he felt actual pain at the sound of her voice and abruptly broke off, pushing her hand from his. Bitterly he said, "You're not trying, Magdalena!" and Magdalena stammered, in childlike protest, "But—I am. I am." But the young man had turned away, sullenly, saying, "Go away and leave me, you mock me."

So Magdalena was sent away, hurt and mortified.

So Magdalena fled the little church, and the churchyard, and lower Edmundston, tears streaking her cheeks.

Hearing, behind her, a pounding, reverberating silence like the waves of an invisible sea; a silence that beat against her eardrums like a great heartbeat, threatening to drown her. And beneath this silence the voice of the singer, not so strong as before, but as exquisite as ever. *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh. Shadows of the evening…* And at the house on Charter Street, in the gathering dusk, she had to ring the bell (which was erratic, defective) for some minutes before grumbling Hannah came to unlock it, to let her, weeping, inside.

5.

"What—what is this thing! This encumbrance that is always with me!"

Suddenly in the midst of Magdalena reading the Ninety-sixth Psalm to her, Aunt Erica began slapping and pushing at her limp left arm with the clawlike fingers of her right hand. A fury seemed to seize her, like a flame passing over her frail, doll-like body; she began to cry in high-pitched angry sobs. Helge who had been knitting close by threw down her needles and hurried to her, as Magdalena, sitting on a stool by her aunt's divan, stared at the stricken woman in astonishment. Helge said, chiding, "Now, Mrs.

Kistenmacher! Now you know what that is," and Aunt Erica cried, "I don't! I don't know!" and Helge said, "Yes, you do, Mrs. Kistenmacher. Say it: 'my arm,'" and Aunt Erica shrieked, “No." Using the strength of her right arm and legs, the elderly woman was trying desperately to push herself up the back of the divan, like a wounded, blindly flailing creature; her eyes bulged in their sockets. Magdalena watched in horror. What could she do? How could she help? Helge had seized Aunt Erica's right hand to calm it, and her; she placed the hand firmly on the left hand which hung useless at the invalid's side, in a way that suggested she'd done in the past. She said, "You see? This is your hand, too, Mrs. Kistenmacher. This is your arm, too. It is all you," and Aunt Erica whispered, "No! It is not," though ceasing her futile struggle, and Helge said, "You mustn't turn against yourself, Mrs. Kistenmacher. Dr. Meinke has told you."

For a moment it seemed that the elderly invalid had returned to her senses. She was panting, and staring at her left arm in its crocheted pink woolen sleeve; experimentally she released the left hand from her right hand, and leaned as far away on the divan as possible without losing her balance. Then her moist little rosebud mouth opened like a bird's beak and her good, right eye narrowed to a squint and as Magdalena and Helge looked on, helpless, she began to scream, and scream.

6.

Magdalena thought *He has sent me away, I must never approach him again*.

Magdalena thought *I failed him: he detests me.*

Magdalena thought, sifting her shiny black rosary beads through her fingers, *God, give me strength not to approach him again. God, give me pride.*

And so for days Magdalena obsessively barricaded the windows of her room against the gusty sunshine and tumult of spring. She made certain that the windows were shut tight, and

locked; and the blinds drawn flush to the sills. During the day she avoided windows elsewhere in the house whenever possible and didn't dare go outside, even to walk about the grounds. At night she slept poorly, pillows pressed against her ears; though she could hear little beyond the anxious pulsing of her own blood, she imagined the singer's voice with unnerving clarity as if he were standing, not miles away in a deserted church, but just outside her bedroom door. *Now the day is over… Night is drawing…*

Fiercely Magdalena whispered to herself, "No!"

§

The wind off the river was damp, chill, smelling of something brackish and metallic. Invisible grit was driven into Magdalena's face, stinging her eyes. How ugly the river looked, the color of molten lead, reflecting a heavy leaden sky. And the riverfront structures and boats, how shabby, derelict. Magdalena was hurrying across Merrimack Bridge, breathless and shivering. Despite the bridge traffic and the harsh lapping sounds of the river she could hear distinctly the young man singing, calling to her. It seemed he was singing with a renewed passion, or desperation. And had he not pleaded with her, *Will you help me, Magdalena?*

This time, Magdalena was determined not to fail him.

Where are you going, child? Aunt Erica had asked, playfully tapping Magdalena's arm. *Your thoughts are flying away from here, and where?* Magdalena had murmured, embarrassed, that she was going for a walk; just in the neighborhood; it was such a beautiful May afternoon (for so the weather had been beautiful, in the hilly district above Edmundston); she promised she wouldn't go far. And Aunt Erica had laughed, her good eye cold twinkling, saying *I don't go far, there's two of us.*

And so Magdalena made her way along the rough riverfront streets, and into the older, deserted neighborhood, and to the old church at the top of a hill. She saw to her surprise that the churchyard was more overgrown and desolate than she recalled, as if a storm had swept violently through it. Dead tree limbs lay

scattered amid the graves, smashed urns, numerous gravestones overturned, severely cracked. Beyond the stone wall where there should have been land, Magdalena saw, as before, an opaque wall of undulating mist, more oppressive than before as it seemed to be quivering with its own malevolent life. And beyond the mist was—the open sea? The great Atlantic Ocean that had so broken her parents, and others who'd made the crossing, that they never wished to see or speak of it again? Magdalena could see no water but believed she could hear, beyond the tenor's strained, hopeful voice, its forceful arrhythmic sound. Always, beyond the human voice, the sound of the great ocean.

And the shrill, cruel shrieks of the gulls overhead, always circling, lunging for their prey.

Another surprise awaited Magdalena at the rear of the church, for she saw that it was hardly a church at all any longer, but rather a ruin; mound of rubble; most of the roof had collapsed inward, and was covered in patches of moss. Yet there remained a narrow entranceway like the opening to a cave, hardly more than the size of a man of ordinary height, into the cobwebbed, shadowy interior. Still the singing continued. A pause, and coughing; quick panting; and again the singing. *Now the day is over… Night is drawing…* Magdalena trembled with excitement and dread—for what if the young man should banish her, again? At once? As soon as he saw her? *Shadows of the evening…* These notes were, to Magdalena's eager ear, as flawless as ever, of surpassing beauty.

She drew nearer to the entrance, and could make out the singer's figure, in approximately the same place as before, pacing about before a ruined altar, in and out of crevices of shadow black as pitch. His fists were clenched, his shoulders hunched with tension. Yet—there was something wrong with him. He was not so young now, nor so handsome. When he whirled at the sound of her footstep, scowling in Magdalena's direction while not seeming to see her, Magdalena realized to her horror that he'd grown skeletal; his face was wizened and sickly pale, as aged as her Aunt Erica's; his neck was emaciated, the ropy tendons and artery prominent. His eyes were narrowed to slits like those of a frightened, ferocious

animal. *He doesn't know me!* Magdalena thought. *He doesn't see me.*

Yet, and this was a truth Magdalena would recall for the remainder of her life, and would entrust to no one except, one day, many decades later, her granddaughter who loved her, she would have cast aside all her pride and fear, and gone to the singer, to present herself to him in any way he would accept her, if there hadn't suddenly stepped out of the shadows another figure—a queer stunted old-young woman, with a wizened monkeyish face, deft and solicitous, clearly compelled by adoration; this person came quickly to the singer as he leaned weakly against a broken pew, and wiped his oily-damp forehead with a cloth; and lifted a pitcher to his mouth, steadying his shaky hands so that he could drink. Ah, how thirsty he was! His emaciated chest rising and sinking with the effort of swallowing! And blind, empty, blank as an idiot's fixed stare, his beautiful eyes turned in Magdalena's direction.

The haglike woman was stroking the singer's thin hands, whispering words of praise and encouragement; he seemed to be listening, and his bloodless lips twitched in a sort of smile; at last he threw his head back proudly, his gray hair thin and straggly on his death's-head of a skull, and began another time to sing. *Now the day is over…* At first his voice quavered, for it was no longer a young man's voice; the ghastly tendons and artery in his throat grew taut; then by degrees his voice grew stronger, richer, as if drawing strength from the man's physical being, sucking life from his very soul. Magdalena recalled his mysterious words uttered not in pride nor certainly in protest but in simple resignation: *I must sing, I have no choice.*

So singing now, as always: *Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh. Shadows of the evening… steal across the sky.*

So for the second and final time Magdalena knew herself banished from this place, and fled too stricken with grief even to weep. A rising sea-wind snatched at her like crude, jeering fingers.

"Please let me in! It's Magdalena!"

Desperately she rang the doorbell but there seemed to be no sound inside—was the doorbell broken? The afternoon had rapidly darkened to night and the house on Charter Street was darkened upstairs and down; Magdalena had been frantic trying to locate it in this neighborhood that, by night, she didn't recognize. She was exhausted from miles of walking, most of it uphill, on slippery wet cobblestones, beset by the wind. She pounded on the heavy oak door with her bare fists, frantic, sobbing like a terrified child. "Please! Let me in! It's Magdalena!" When at last the outdoor light was switched on she could see a woman's stern face at a vestibule window; it was Hannah staring at her without recognition. Magdalena's thick long hair had come undone from its neat coils on both sides of her head and was snarled and windblown; she was to discover afterward to her amazement that most of its fair, wheat-brown color had drained from it, as color drains from the world at the hour of a solar eclipse; her young face was lined and haggard, her clothes were disheveled, with a look of being torn. "Hannah, Hannah, please! Have mercy!" Magdalena begged.

At last, as if reluctantly, Hannah seemed to recognize Magdalena's voice, if not her face; she relented, and swung open the heavy oak door. "Miss Schön! I wouldn't have known you," she said, staring at the girl with wonder and sympathy.

The Genesis Mausoleum

Colleen Douglas

"Yes, I found the place," said Arpad. "It's a queer sort of place, pretty much as the legends describe it." He spat quickly into the fire, as if speaking was distasteful to him, and, half-averting his face from the scrutiny of Tefere, he stared with morose and somber eyes into the jungle-matted Venezuelan darkness.

Tefere, still weak and dizzy from the fever that had incapacitated him, was curiously puzzled. Arpad, he thought, had undergone an inexplicable change during the three days of his absence; a change that was too elusive to be fully defined.

Others, however, were all too obvious. Arpad, even during extreme hardship or illness, had been irrepressibly cheerful. Now he seemed sullen, uncommunicative, and preoccupied. His face had grown hollow—even pointed—and his eyes had narrowed to secretive slits. Tefere was troubled by these changes; he tried to dismiss his impressions, putting them down to the influence of the ebbing fever.

"But can't you tell me what the place was like?" he persisted.

"There isn't much to tell" said Arpad, in a queer grumbling tone. "Just a few crumbling walls and falling pillars."

"But didn't you find the burial-pit of the Incan legend, where the gold was supposed to be?"

"I found it—but there was no treasure." Arpad's voice had taken on surliness and Tefere decided to refrain from further questioning.

"I guess," he commented lightly, "that we had better stick to orchid hunting. Treasure doesn't seem to be in our line. By the way, did you see any unusual flowers or plants during the trip?"

"Hell, no," Arpad snapped. His face had gone suddenly ashen in the firelight, and his eyes had assumed a set glare. "Shut up, can't you? I don't want to talk. I've had a headache all day; some damned Venezuelan fever coming on, I suppose. We'd better head for the

Orinoco tomorrow. I've had all I want of this trip."'

Morgan Arpad and Marshal Tefere, professional orchid hunters, with two Amerindian guides, had been following an obscure tributary of the upper Orinoco. The country was rich in rare flowers, and beyond its floral wealth, they had been drawn by vague but persistent rumors among the local tribes concerning the existence of a ruined city somewhere on this tributary; a city that contained a burial pit in which vast treasures of gold, silver, and jewels had been interred together with the dead of some nameless people. The two men had thought it worthwhile to investigate these rumors. Tefere had fallen sick while they were still a full day's journey from the site of the ruins, and Arpad had gone on in a canoe with one of the guides, leaving the other to attend to Tefere. He had returned at nightfall of the third day following his departure.

Tefere decided after a while, as he lay staring at his companion, that the latter's moroseness as likely due to disappointment over his failure to find the treasure. However, he had to admit, it was not like Arpad to be disappointed or downcast under such circumstances. After all, he had only recently suffered the loss of his wife Christine, and still pressed on with this assignment. Arpad did not speak again, but sat glaring before him as if he saw something invisible to others. Somehow, there was a shadowy fear in his aspect. Tefere continued to watch him, and saw that the guides, impassive and cryptic, were also watching him, as if with some obscure expectancy. The riddle was too much for Tefere, and he gave it up after a while, lapsing into a restless, fever-turbulent slumber from which he awakened at intervals to see the set face of Arpad, dimmer and more distorted each time with the slowly dying fire and the invading shadows.

Tefere felt stronger in the morning: his mind was clear, his pulse tranquil once more; and he saw with mounting concern the indisposition of Arpad, who seemed to rouse and exert himself with great difficulty, speaking hardly a word and moving with sluggishness. He appeared to have forgotten his announced project of returning toward the Orinoco, and Tefere took entire charge of the preparations for departure. His companion's condition puzzled him

more and more—apparently there was no fever and the symptoms were wholly ambiguous. However, on general principles, he administered a stiff dose of quinine to Arpad before they started.

The paling saffron of dawn sifted upon them through the jungle tops as they loaded their belongings into the dugouts and pushed off down the slow current. Tefere sat near the bow of one of the boats, with Arpad in the rear, and a large bundle of orchid roots and part of their equipment filling the middle. The two guides occupied the other boat, together with the rest of the supplies.

It was an uneventful journey. The river wound like a sluggish olive snake between dark, interminable walls of forest from which the goblin faces of orchids leered. There were no sounds other than the splash of paddles, the furious chattering of monkeys and petulant cries of fiery colored macaws. The sun rose above the jungle and poured down a tide of brilliance.

Tefere rowed steadily, looking back over his shoulder at times to address Arpad with some casual remark or friendly question. The latter, with dazed eyes and features queerly pale and pinched in the sunlight, sat dully erect and made no effort to use his paddle. He offered no reply to the queries of Tefere, but shook his head at intervals with a sort of shuddering motion. After a while he began to moan thickly, as if in pain or delirium.

They went on in this manner for an hour. The heat grew more oppressive between the stifling walls of jungle. Tefere became aware of a shriller tone in the moans of his companion. Looking back, he saw that Arpad had removed his sun-helmet, seemingly oblivious of the heat, and was clawing at the crown of his head with frantic fingers. Convulsions shook his entire body; the dugout began to rock dangerously as he tossed to and fro in agony. His voice mounted to a high pitched shrieking.

Tefere made a quick decision. There was a break in the lining of forest and he headed the boat for shore immediately. The guides followed, whispering between themselves and eyeing the sick man with glances of apprehensive awe and terror that puzzled Tefere. He felt that there was some dark and unsettling mystery about the whole affair, and he could not imagine what was wrong with Arpad.

He went through in his mind all the known manifestations of malignant tropical diseases but among them, he could not recognize the thing that assailed his companion.

Having gotten Arpad ashore on a narrow beach without the aid of the guides, who seemed unwilling to approach the sick man, Tefere administered a heavy hypodermic injection of morphine from his medicine chest. This appeared to ease Arpad's suffering and the convulsions ceased. Tefere, taking advantage of their remission, proceeded to examine the crown of Arpad's head.

He was startled to find, amid the thick disheveled hair, a hard and pointed lump that resembled the tip of a horn, rising under the still-unbroken skin. Worse, as he probed the area, it seemed to grow beneath his fingers.

At the same time, abruptly and mysteriously, Arpad opened his eyes and appeared to regain full consciousness; for a few minutes he was more his normal self than at any time since his return from the ruins. He began to talk, as if anxious to relieve his mind of some oppressing burden. His voice was peculiarly thick and toneless, but Tefere was able to follow his mutterings and piece them together.

"The pit! The pit!" said Arpad. "The infernal thing that was in the pit, in the deep crypt…! I wouldn't go back there for the treasure of a dozen El Dorados… I didn't tell you much about those ruins, Tefere. Somehow it was hard—impossibly hard—to talk.

"I guess the guide knew there was something wrong with the ruins. He led me to the place… but he wouldn't tell me anything about it; and he waited by the riverside while I searched for the treasure.

"Great grey walls there were, old; they loomed and leaned at mad, unnatural angles, threatening to crush the trees about them. And there were columns, too: thick, swollen columns the likes of which I had never seen, on which, abominable carvings the jungle had not wholly screened from view.

"There was no trouble finding that accursed burial pit. The pavement above had been broken through quite recently, I think. A big tree had pried it with its roots; one of the flags had been tilted back on the pavement and another had fallen through into the pit.

There was a large hole whose bottom I could see dimly in the light. Something glimmered at the bottom; but I could not be sure what it was.

"I had taken along a coil of rope, as you remember. I tied one end of it to a main root of the tree, dropped the other through the opening and went down like a monkey. When I got to the bottom I could see little at first in the gloom, except the whitish glimmering all around me, at my feet. Something that was brittle crunched beneath my feet when I began to move. I turned on my flashlight and saw that the place was littered with bones. Human skeletons lay tumbled everywhere. They must have been removed long ago… I groped around amid the bones and dust but couldn't find anything of value, not even a bracelet or a finger-ring on any of the skeletons.

"It wasn't until I thought of climbing out that I noticed in one of the corners—nearest to the opening in the roof—ten feet above my head it hung, and I had almost touched it unknowingly when I descended the rope.

"It looked like lattice-work at first. Then I saw that the lattice was partly formed of human bones—a complete skeleton, like that of a warrior. A pale withered thing grew out of the skull, like a set of fantastic antlers ending in myriads of long and stringy tendrils that had spread upward till they reached the roof. They must have lifted the skeleton or body along with them as they climbed.

"I examined the thing with my flashlight. It must have been a plant of some sort and apparently it had started growing in the cranium: some of the branches had issued from the crown, others through the eye holes, the mouth and the nose holes to flare upward. And the roots of the thing had gone downward, trellising themselves on every bone. The very toes and fingers were ringed with them, and they drooped in writhing coils. Worst of all, the ones that had issued from the toe-ends were rooted in a second skull, which dangled just below, with fragments of the broken-off root system.

"The sight made me feel more than a little nauseated at the inexplicable mingling of the human and the plant. I started to climb the rope, in a feverish hurry to get out, but the thing fascinated me

and I couldn't help pausing to study it a little more when I had climbed halfway. I leaned toward it too fast, I guess, and the rope began to sway, bringing my face lightly against the leprous, antler-shaped boughs above the skull.

"Something broke and I found my head enveloped in a cloud of powder. The stuff settled on my hair… my beautiful raven-haired Chrissie-Lou who had always taken such care, would have been horrified; it got into my nose and eyes, nearly choking and blinding me. I shook it off as well as I could. Then I climbed on and pulled myself through the opening…"

The effort of narration had been too heavy a strain and Arpad lapsed into disconnected mumblings. The mysterious malady returned and his delirious ramblings were mixed with groans of torture and cries to Chrissie-Lou. But at moments he regained a flash of coherence.

"My head! My head!" he muttered. "There must be something in my brain, something that grows and spreads; I can feel it there taking root!"

The dreadful convulsions began once more and Arpad writhed uncontrollably, shrieking with agony. Tefere, sick at heart and shocked by his sufferings, abandoned all effort to restrain him and took up the hypodermic. With much difficulty, he managed to inject a triple dose and Arpad grew quiet by degrees, and lay with open glassy eyes, breathing heavily. Tefere for the first time noticed the odd protrusion of Arpad's eyeballs, which seemed to start from their sockets, making it impossible for the lids to close and lending the drawn features an expression of horror. It was as if something were pushing Arpad's eyes from his head.

Tefere, trembling with sudden weakness and terror, felt that he was in some nightmare. He could not believe the story Arpad had told him. Assuring himself that his companion had been ill throughout with the incubation of some strange fever, he stooped over and found that the horn-shaped lump on Arpad's head had now broken through the skin.

Surreality took over as he stared at the object that his prying fingers had revealed amid the matted hair. It was unmistakably a

plant-bud of some sort, with folds of pale green and bloody pink that seemed about to expand. The thing issued from above the center of the skull.

Nausea swept upon Tefere and he recoiled from the lolling head, averting his gaze. His fever was returning, there was a deep ache in all his limbs and his eyes blurred with a miasmal mist.

He fought to subdue his illness. He could not give way to it; he had to fight on, stay with Arpad and the guides until they reached the nearest trading station.

Through sheer determination his eyes cleared and he felt a resurgence of strength. He looked around for the guides and saw, with a start, that they had vanished. Peering further, he observed that the dugout used by the guides had also disappeared. He and Arpad had been deserted. Perhaps the guides had known what was wrong with the sick man and had been afraid. They were gone, and had taken much of the camp equipment and most of the provisions with them.

Tefere turned once more to the body of Arpad, quelling his repugnance. Resolutely he drew out his clasp knife and, stooping over the stricken man, he excised the protruding bud, cutting as close to the scalp as he could with safety. The thing was unnaturally tough and rubbery; it exuded a thin, sanguineous fluid and Tefere shuddered when he saw its internal structure, full of nerve-like filaments, with a core that suggested cartilage.

He flung it aside, quickly, on the river sand. Then, lifting Arpad in his arms, he lurched and staggered toward the remaining boat. Alternately carrying and dragging his burden, Tefere reached the boat at last. With the remainder of his failing strength he propped Arpad in the stern against the pile of equipment.

Tefere's fever was mounting apace. After much delay and with tedious, half-delirious exertions, he pushed off from the shore and rowed intermittently until the fever mastered him wholly and the oar slipped from oblivious fingers…

Tefere awoke in the yellow glare of dawn, his senses comparatively clear. His illness had left a great languor, but his first thought was of Arpad. He twisted about and sat facing his

companion.

Arpad still reclined, half sitting, half lying against the pile of blankets. His knees were drawn up, his hands clasping them as if in rigor. His features had grown as stark and ghastly as those of a dead man; however, the thing that caused Tefere to gasp with horror was –

During the interim of Tefere's delirium and his lapse into slumber, the monstrous plant bud had grown again with rapidity from Arpad's head. A loathsome pale-green stem was mounting thickly and had started to branch like antlers after attaining a height of six or seven inches.

More than this, similar growths had issued from the eyes and their stems, climbing vertically across the forehead, had entirely displaced the eyeballs. They were branching like the thing from the crown. The antlers were all tipped with pale vermilion. They quivered, nodding rhythmically in the warm, windless air. From the mouth another stem protruded, curling upward like a long and whitish tongue. It had not yet begun to divide.

Tefere closed his eyes to shut out the sight. In his mind's eye, he still saw the cadaverous features, the climbing stems that quivered against the dawn like ghastly hydras. They seemed to be waving toward him, growing and lengthening as they did so. His eyes snapped open with a start of new terror—that the antlers were actually taller than they had been a few moments previous.

After that he sat watching them in a sort of baleful hypnosis. The illusion of the plant's visible growth and freer movement increased upon Tefere. Arpad, however, did not stir and his parchment face appeared to shrivel and fall in, as if the roots of the growth were draining his blood, devouring his very flesh in their hunger.

Tefere wrenched his eyes away and stared at the river shore. The stream had widened and the current had grown more sluggish. He tried to figure out their location, looking vainly for some familiar landmark in the monotonous dull-green cliffs of jungle that lined the margin.

His mind began to wander with an odd inconsequence, coming

back always, in a sort of closed circle, to the thing that was devouring Arpad. With a flash of scientific curiosity he found himself wondering to what genus it belonged. It was neither fungus nor pitcher plant, nor anything that he had ever encountered or heard of in his explorations. It must have come, as Arpad had suggested, from an alien world: it was nothing that the earth could conceivably have nourished.

He felt, with a comforting assurance, that Arpad was dead. That, at least, was a mercy. But even as he shaped the thought Tefere heard a low, guttural moaning and peering at Arpad, he saw that his limbs and body were twitching slightly. The twitching increased and took on a rhythmic regularity, though at no time did it resemble the agonized and violent convulsions of the previous day. It was plainly automatic and Tefere saw that it was timed with the languorous swaying of the plant. The effect on the watcher was insidiously mesmeric and once Tefere caught himself beating the rhythm with his foot.

He tried to pull himself together, groping desperately for something to which his sanity could cling. His illness returned: fever, nausea, and revulsion… But before he yielded to it utterly, he drew his loaded revolver from its holster and fired six times into Arpad's quivering body. He knew that he had not missed, but after the final bullet Arpad still moaned and twitched in unison with the swaying of the plant, and Tefere, sliding into delirium, heard still the ceaseless, automatic moaning.

There was no time in the world of seething unreality and shoreless oblivion through which he drifted. When he came to himself again, Tefere could not know if hours or weeks had elapsed. But he knew at once that the boat was no longer moving; lifting himself dizzily, he saw that it had floated into shallow water and mud and was nosing the beach of a tiny, jungle-tufted isle in mid-river. The putrid odor of slime was about him like a stagnant pool and he heard the strident humming of insects.

It was either late morning or early afternoon, for the sun was high. Lianas were drooping above him from the island trees like uncoiled serpents and orchids, marked with mottling, leaned toward

him from lowering boughs. Immense butterflies went past on sumptuously spotted wings.

He sat up, feeling very giddy and lightheaded, and faced again the horror that accompanied him. The thing had grown incredibly: the three-antlered stems mounting above Arpad's head had become gigantic and had put out masses of ropy feelers that tossed in the air, as if searching for support. In the topmost antlers a prodigious blossom had opened—a sort of fleshy disk, broad as a man's face and white as leprosy.

Arpad's features had shrunk until the outlines of every bone were visible. He was a mere death's head in a mask of human skin and beneath his clothing, his body was little more than a skeleton. He was quite still now, except for the communicated quivering of the stems.

Tefere wanted to hurl himself forward in a mad impulse to grapple with the growth. But a strange paralysis held him back. The plant was like a living and sentient thing—a thing that watched him, that dominated him with its superior will. And the huge blossom, as Tefere stared, took on the dim semblance of a face. It was somehow like the face of Arpad, but the lineaments were twisted all awry and were mingled with those of something inhuman. Tefere could not move—he could not take his eyes from the abnormality.

By some miracle, his fever had left him and it did not return. Instead, there came an eternity of frozen fright and madness in which he sat facing the plant. It towered before him from the dry, dead shell that had been Arpad, its swollen, glutted stems and branches swaying gently, its huge flower leering at him with its travesty of a human face. He thought that he heard a low, singing sound, ineffably sweet, but whether it emanated from the plant or was a mere hallucination of his overwrought senses he could not know.

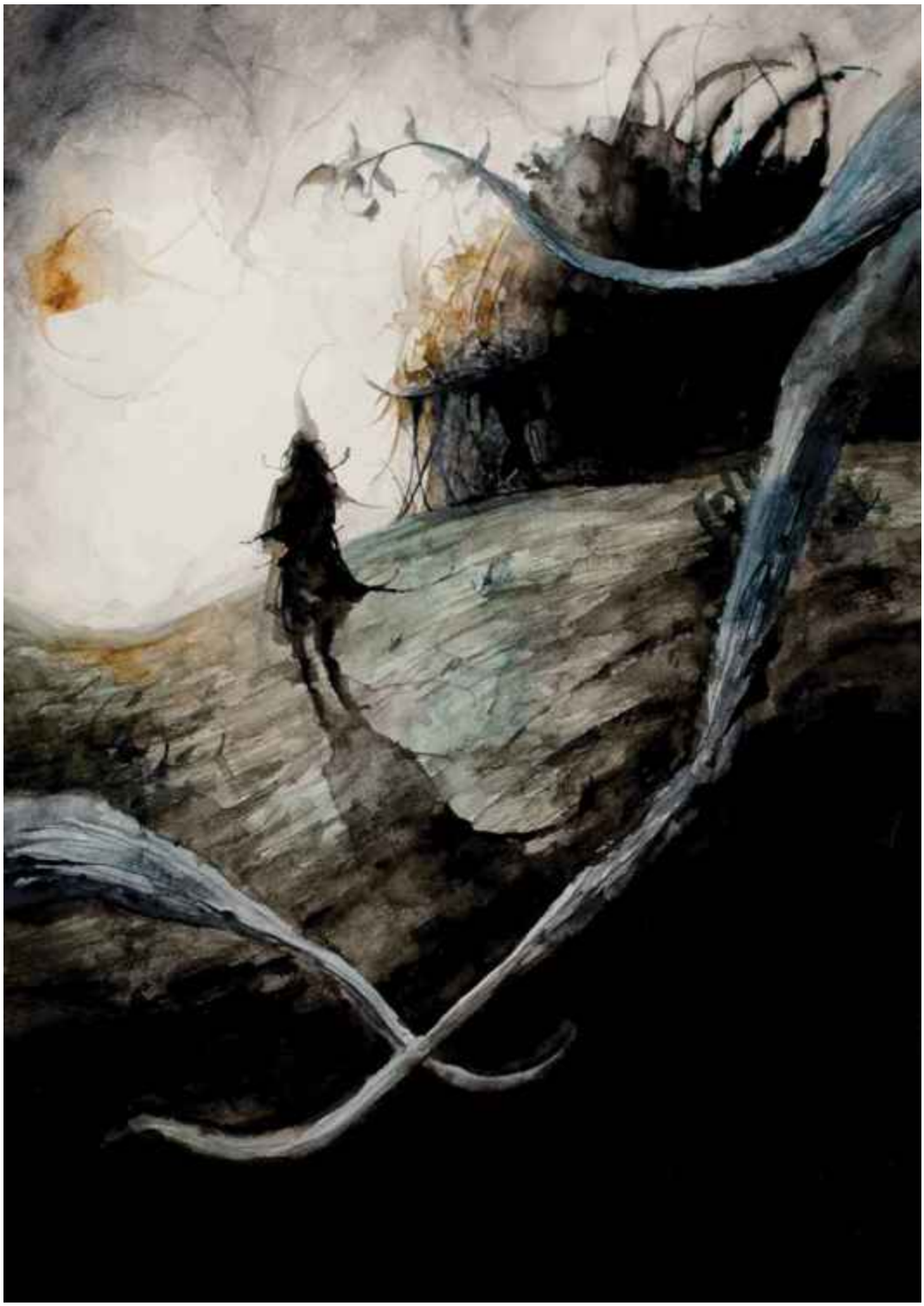
The hours went by and a grueling sun poured down its beams like molten lead. His head swam with weakness and heat, but he could not relax the rigor of his posture. There was no change in the nodding monstrosity, which seemed to have attained its full growth above the head of its victim. After a long interim, Tefere's eyes were

drawn to the shrunken hands of Arpad, which still clasped drawn-up knees in a spasmodic clutch. Through the ends of the fingers, tiny white rootlets had broken and were writhing slowly in the air, groping, it seemed, for a new source of nourishment. Then from the neck and chin, other tips were breaking and over the whole body the clothing stirred in a curious manner, as if with the crawling of hidden lizards.

At the same time the singing grew louder, sweeter, and the swaying of the great plant assumed an indescribably seductive tempo. It was like the allurement of voluptuous sirens or the deadly languor of dancing cobras. Tefere felt an irresistible compulsion: a summons was being laid upon him and his drugged mind and body must obey it. The very fingers of Arpad, twisting, seemed to beckon him. Suddenly he was on his hands and knees in the bottom of the boat. Inch by inch, terror and fascination contending in his brain, he crept forward, dragging himself over the disregarded bundle of orchid plants until his head was against the withered hands of Arpad, from which hung the questing roots.

Some spell had made him helpless. Tefere felt the rootlets as they moved like delving fingers through his hair and over his face and neck, and started to strike in with agonizing, needle-sharp tips. He could not move; he could not even close his eyelids. In a frozen stare, he saw the gold and carmine flash of a hovering butterfly as the roots began to pierce his pupils.

Amid the ever-growing web of the bloated and colossal plant in its upper branches, through the still, stifling afternoon, a second flower began to unfold.



The Woman in the Hill

Tamsyn Muir

November 11, 1907
Elm Cottage, Turanga
Waikopua Creek, New Zealand

Dear Dorothy,

This is the last time I intend ever to write to you. Though you may take this letter as a freak or crank, I ask that you reconsider how likely it is that I would write such madness—that is, unless I knew it were the truth. In my need to convince you I will lay out the events using only fact—what I saw with my own eyes and have subsequently acted upon based on rational belief—and at the last, pray to God you believe me.

I know you heard the gossip and the insinuation surrounding my young friend Elizabeth W–. I will emphasise again her workaday nature and good common sense, not at all given to the morbid or fantastic, the model of a farmer's wife. This concerns last April, when she had been recently married and had moved to the property opposite the old Broomfield slip. Regarding my silence on the scandal that surrounded her afterward, I may only defend myself by saying I thought it none of my business to relate.

It must have been eleven o'clock one summer's night when I was startled from sleep by a fearful knocking. It was such a frenetic scraping and hammering that I would have been up and dressing at that alone, and with Kenneth's gun, even had I not recognised Elizabeth calling for help. Her voice was so slurred that for a moment I thought her drunk, and when I let her in I thought worse. She was shivering and febrile in my kitchen for a long time—so unable to talk and so fearful that I half-convinced myself that the foolish rumours were true and we were under invasion by the

Māori. After a strong cup of tea and some whisky she told me this:

An old friend of hers had lived on the Peninsula and her sad story was well-known there. The husband worked in transporting wood down to the estuary and was often away and she left alone. This friend, Alice N—, missed a visit to Elizabeth one day, and the postman found the house empty. Everyone thought she had been called away and thought too little of it, but then the husband came back months later and found his wife gone and being a grim and miserable man made any number of accusations. It was a sad, short scandal. I did not think it unusual in this country, where English brides come to marry and then regret, but Elizabeth found it uncharacteristic and went herself to the Peninsula cottage. The house was shut up by then. The husband had left for Auckland and no trace of Alice remained. But the whole preyed on Elizabeth's mind and she found something so unwholesome about the mystery that she determined to investigate.

It being early in the day, she took to the bush behind the house. I acknowledge that this would be foolish for most, but in Elizabeth's defence it was dry weather, no chance of slips. She had enough bush-sense to know when she had to turn back. She was sufficiently suspicious but not so alarmed as to get assistance. She knew there was no danger in Clifton and certainly not from the local tribes. I cannot blame her for it now. She examined the back of the property and past the Waikopua into the hills. There was nothing of Alice—or it seemed so—and here, Elizabeth quit her story and let out a trill of laughter.

It made me jump; Dorothy, it was the awful laughter of a hysteric. She would not be calmed until I locked the door and lit the fire. When she looked at me her eyes were red as though she had been weeping, but there was not a tear-stain on her face. When more composed she told me that, deep in a hot and untidy part of the valley, she had seen a *door in the hill*—not the remnants of a pā or even an old raupō hut—but a door.

When I questioned her on this she described a portal—a cave entrance that had been propped with slabs of stone, one atop two others like a mantel, and that the stone had been crudely worked.

The carvings did not resemble native carvings and Elizabeth could not really describe what they *did* resemble, except that they were ugly and looked as though they had been done in violence: as though someone had taken a chisel and scored cuts to no purpose. I gave her another blanket and I asked if she had gone inside.

Yes, naturally. She had prowled around the outside and found that the earth around did not crumble, and that the doorway was wide and tall and could have easily taken a man twice her breadth and size. I did not chide her for going inside, for I was too appalled and bewildered and she continued in a mutter and did not look up from her tea:

She had gone inside. She had found the passage quite spacious. She had meant to turn back once reaching the end of this corridor, but that it had made a steep turn and she had seen a light at the end: not torchlight, but the sickly radiance one sees in the Aranui grottoes. And it was not a cavern at all, she said, but *made*. I questioned her on this. Elizabeth did not answer. There were many corridors leading off from a main chamber and her assumption at this point was that she had found some horrid smuggling cave or tuckaway. There were things in the alcoves but she said she had not touched them and repeated this as though it was important, that she *had not touched them*.

All this time she had been calling for Alice and not listening, and then she became aware of a sound. It was the incessant lapping of water on stone. She pushed on down until she reached the cathedral-room of this catacomb, very high and square, and here there was a great pool of slow-moving water sloshing up against the rock. Here also there was a stone block she described as being about hip height and an enormous basin. Standing there was Alice, said Elizabeth. And after that she fled.

I was greatly puzzled, Dorothy. When I asked her to explain, Elizabeth began to shake again and would not drink, and she pushed off the blanket as though she were hot. She kept muttering catches of nonsense. She said that Alice was not right. Unwell, I asked, or somehow injured? No; but all the same she was not right. The two had talked, and Alice had claimed—and I confess the word

gave me a thrill of strange horror—that she was *imprisoned*. Elizabeth could not say any more. Now indeed I thought that I had unearthed the source of all her misery—that in an uncharacteristic terror she had fled back out into the bush and the upper air, and left her friend behind. Now she was consumed by guilt and shame. I told her that I would fetch the men from Whitford Hall and we would go to the cave at once.

Dorothy, here Elizabeth screamed. Her voice was the idiot squeal of an animal. No! she said, no! It was too late, Alice had gone now. Elizabeth crawled from her chair and kneeled in front of me and clawed at my floorboards beyond reason until I saw her fingernails split, and she cried out again and what she said made me afraid in all the ways it should have made me pity her hysteria:

"But I'm here—tell me I'm here, Caroline—*for the love of God, keep me here*!"

I gave her what comfort I could give a madwoman, put her in the spare bedroom and sent for her husband at first light. Come morning she was so weary that she was biddable, though also hollow-eyed and stupid, like a dreamer waking in a strange room. Looking back—the madness in me to let her go!—but what choice did I have? It was nonsense. She had experienced a cruel scare for someone else's benefit, or a nightmare of the subconscious, or some other sad and inexplicable reason that would come to light eventually. She needed rest and not pandering. Yet as she was led away my palms were tight and hot, for there was a look in her eyes that is inane to describe, yet I must describe it: it was the dead terror of a man before the Pit.

Time lulled me into an uneasy security. My evenings never recovered. I had even ventured with Elizabeth one hot day to the Peninsula, in order to lay her fears to final rest, though she startled like a white-eyed colt the whole venture. Naturally, there was no door. We re-traced her steps and found the valley she had come to in her story, and there was nothing but dead trunks of the rough tree fern where a door had been in her memory. I even pushed hard at the earth and scrabbled around at the rocks to show there was nothing beneath, but at this she shuddered and pulled at my sleeves

to stop.

"Don't! Lord, don't, Caroline," she said lowly. "We'll find nothing."

The next three months I heard from her seldom and after six I heard nothing at all. She had grown increasingly withdrawn and was "out" to callers when neighbours knew perfectly well she was in, and would plead migraines when it came to the monthly church meeting, even though she had been such a pillar of the Christian Women's Society. She returned my letters in a cursory fashion, then stopped altogether, and I felt such a curious admixture of rebuff and relief that I became derelict in my duty and quit all attempts. I had not written for two months before I realised she was gone. Her husband had been too mad with worry and pain to think of singling me out in the scandal. His mare had returned without her on it, rolling its eyes and nearly dead with sweat, and that was all he knew.

How could I voice my suspicions? I could barely voice them to myself. It seemed the saddest and most likely happenstance was that Elizabeth, wasted from months of nerves, had come to grief alone in the Bush; that spectres and nightmares had led to her death, but the sort that were immaterial, borne from anxiety. I told this to myself every evening and morning and scourged my thoughts of that benighted valley—that squatting, phylacteric depression, that mad hallucination of a waiting door—ready for grief to take its rightful place and forgetfulness to come after.

Grief and distance did not mount their rightful thrones. My nights were pitiable, Dorothy, my days worse. I have lived forty years and not let morbidity touch me, I have never maundered or taken freaks, yet I could not escape imaginings of a darkened door, Elizabeth struggling down filth-smeared corridors in the dark, Elizabeth as waxen and afraid as she was the day I set to the side of the hill. I was sleeping with the door barred and with Kenneth's gun. I would wait by the window in the most profound darkness and watch for some figure to crest the hill—Elizabeth's, or faceless Alice's, they were all one. Perhaps you are now saying to yourself, "Caroline, you should have sent for the doctor and diagnosed a

guilty conscience." But guilt had never troubled me either.

That June, I made for the Peninsula. The hills were grey and wet with drizzle. I had left a note explaining where I had gone, to be picked up by the postman if I did not retrieve it before morning. I had made sensible arrangements. I had supplies. Thus fortified, I went to the valley where I had gone with Elizabeth, to a slanted part of the hill, in a clinging mist—and sunk between the cringing branches of fern was *a door*.

It was made of two slabs of violently worked stone with a third sitting on top. The earth around this stone was churned and grey, with fresh gouges cut out of the hillside. My lamp made little impression on those clouded shadows within, instead bouncing the darkness to and fro. When I looked more closely at the carvings I found them grotesque, forming faces the one minute, then meaningless gibberish the next, somehow aggressively gross and foul. I examined them little. Like Elizabeth before me, I chose to make my way down that long, breathless passage to the bowels of the hill.

The corridor was so steep that I had to hold my lamp at waist height to descend. And it would suddenly zig-zag—break off at an angle, double in on itself, more of a passage laid down by a burrowing creature than one by an architect—so that I scraped myself badly on irregularities in the wall, for I am a bigger woman than Elizabeth. I held out my lamp to them at one point and was repulsed. They seemed like meaningless notches until I pulled back to see them in toto, and there I saw the repeated graffito of a figure in chains. I thought it was a patterned line of yoked animals, each holding the beast ahead's tail in its jaws, but the carving was an undeveloped scribble. The animals continued on and on and down the stairs in their endless march. Their eyes bulged and their manes tangled in their teeth. It was not worth looking at. A final drastic descent forced my eyes away from the carvings and to attend the more urgent business of not breaking my neck.

The bottom level opened up into a narrow room with eight sides. An alcove was set into each, with each alcove pock-marked with niches. An archway led into the dark main artery and a half-

arch into two connecting rooms. My lamplight was increasingly sulky despite the fresh oil and wick, and in this light, like Elizabeth had, I took the whole for a smuggler's den. Inside each niche was an irregularly wrapped bundle of rough sacking or crudely pounded flax.

I took my knife and eased out one of the bundles, not liking the greasy sacking or the oily stains it left on my fingers. If there had been filthy remains in there I might have been less disturbed than I was by what I found: an unfamiliar calico dress, with a blouse, jacket and boots. A quick slash of another bundle proved to similarly hold a woman's clothes, neatly folded. The next room was so peppered with niches it looked like a beehive, and each contained more of these effects. Some of the clothes were of an antiquated style. One bundle held a fibrous patterned wrapper such as some Māori still wear. My guttering lamp hinted at more chambers ahead—more chambers, and deeper, that I never visited—alcove upon alcove, and God knows they were all probably full.

I took my lamp away from those miserable artefacts. Trophies, I thought then, pointing to some grotesque kidnapping or slavery spree.

I continued on down the main passage. It sloped down sharply and I had to press on the ice-cold, slippery walls in order not to lose my footing. The final descent took me to an enormous chamber, Dorothy, as Elizabeth had described, only more vast and empty and black than she could ever have communicated. I set my lamp down and it shuddered and spluttered in the face of such enormous shadow. Here I became aware of the hush only a great and quiet body of water can make. My sight slowly adjusted to some dim braziers filled with what looked like greenish coals—flameless and crawling, moving independently of each other somehow—and the light cast weird ripples on a pool of wide, drear, fathomless water. The light also fell upon a great stone slab where the water sloshed down into carved channels and washed about its base, and fell on a basin big enough for a child to curl up inside it, and it fell also on my friend Elizabeth.

But not Elizabeth's miserable corpse: Elizabeth alive and well

and living, Elizabeth as fresh as though she had come through the door with me.

"Oh, Caroline, thank God," she said, as naturally as ever. More naturally, even, than she had been of months previous; something like her of old, with that same familiar ease. But it was wrong, Dorothy. I cannot describe, as she could not describe either. It was dim in that room but I could see the stark whites of her eyes and the hairs rose on the back of my neck. "What a relief *you* came."

Of course I asked her if she was all right, if she was hurt in any way; she gave me a brief, almost lipless smile, and this was not an expression I had ever seen her wear. She denied injury. She was fine, she said; she'd tell me all about it later. What was important was that I could let her out.

I asked her why she needed to be *let out* and she said she couldn't get out alone. I couldn't see why not, as it wasn't as though the corridors were so labyrinthine and nothing seemed to bar her. The water washed close to her bare brown feet. I grew impatient. I demanded to know where had she been and by what means was she now *here*, in the very place she had feared most?

"Caroline," she said calmly, "I never left."

Then she walked toward me. I cannot write clearly of how she moved because every time I think of it my head pounds and my nose often bleeds. But yet she moved and the manner in which her bones shifted inside her skin, and in contrast to how you or I would move—

I believe there is a part of the mind that decides upon courses of action without requiring conscious thought. I also believe that these are left over from the antique days when Man was preyed upon, before cities and civilization. I told you I had been sensible, Dorothy; it was a matter of conscious decision that I had brought Kenneth's gun. But it was on this aforementioned instinct that I lifted it, took aim, and shot Elizabeth dead.

I did not wait around to see her fall. I could rely upon my accuracy. I fled into the lapping darkness while all around me the sound of water filled my ears—deafened, driven mad by a sound I did not know if I was conjuring up, desperate to find light as a

swimmer to break water. I scrambled up the narrow steps and through the angular shaft, convinced that if I stopped to heave for breath or look over my shoulder I would meet my end.

Did I murder a young woman, or did I avenge her? Did she die there down in the dark, Dorothy, or is the very idea I could have killed her a laughable one? Perhaps it would have been cleverer to search in those insidious bundles until I found the one that had been hers. Certainly everything down there should have been burnt. But not by my hand, Dorothy, not by any hand I have met in this life, I think, nor yours. What is down there should not be sought, not even for purposes of expurgation.

That place showed itself to me in my dreams and did not leave me after waking; it simply widened its window to the very edges of my vision. I have seen the cave and the water and the altar constantly since then. Even if I take the medicine that the doctor prescribed, the one to help me sleep, it never comes to any good. I was never a beauty but I have grown twisted and haggard for lack of peace. It's little wonder that they all think I am ill. At least I have no husband to wonder at my malaise and my megrims, like poor Elizabeth's. I may sit and tremble alone every time I think a door in my house creaks open. I never go anywhere without Kenneth's gun now. It sits next to me as I write.

And yet I know I must go back. I will go back. I have held on this long, but it has been unbearable suffering. I have concluded that the door is a disease and that the act of passing through its foetid dark is enough to invalid one. Perhaps I had nothing to fear from what Elizabeth had become. I am not sure. Maybe you are not meant to go back until the place is ready for you and your own alcove is empty. I am ready now: last night I took all the drugs Dr. Miller had left and I still woke at the end of my garden, digging at a slope there with my bare and bleeding hands. I will not sleep again.

Dorothy, I took that place with me. It is inside me now. Whosoever is its master is well-versed in claiming victims. You are the one to whom I may try to communicate it and therefore, I will warn you before I succumb. You must not come. The only woman you may save now is yourself. You have been a rare friend and

correspondent. If you deem me a madwoman I won't care, just so long as you stay in town and never set foot in Turanga. It is too much like you to come and investigate if I disappeared from hearing. If I present you the facts to begin with, it may quell your desire to procure them. Do not come. This is not your mystery.

I do not know my purpose. I do not know what I am to be, nor Elizabeth, nor Alice—those numberless alcoves, Dorothy, where have we gone? Elizabeth was the merest child. The cruelties it could do with you I cannot imagine. When I think of how she moved—this country is so new to us and so old to the world, and its emptiness should have been a warning rather than an invitation—there are terrible things in the darkness and I will not let you become another of them.

My final wish is this: that you respect our long friendship in the face of derangement. Do not come. Do not question. Live a long life and go into the hills as seldom as possible. Remember me kindly and for my sake, remember Elizabeth kindly, and for hers a woman called Alice and hundreds else. We passed through the door. We have been trapped and set loose. I wish to be the last.

If by awful chance you see the door—if it comes to you invidiously in its defiled stone and darkness—the entrance to the water and to the holes where we go, you must think of me within. Then use dynamite.

I remained
Your faithful friend
Caroline B—.

This letter was found concealed in the effects of Auckland resident Dr. Dorothy L—, eight months after her May 1908 disappearance.

The Face of Jarry

Cat Hellisen

The beach was empty. People don't like to walk their dogs so far down the strand, especially after that woman got murdered. A group of kids stabbed her to death for her cellphone. Part of me really hoped it was an iPhone or something and she didn't die over a crappy Pep-store entry level Android. Because that would have sucked. I mean, it sucked anyway, but you know.

It was an early morning phone call with my mother that had driven me here. The same tail-devouring conversation: questions about the ex, how I could look prettier if I made a little more effort. A numb circle of repetition that had me running, as usual, trying to escape the purgatory of my mother's disappointment.

The sand was cold under my feet. I'd shucked my battered slops and tossed them in my sling bag, and all around me the beach was damp and strange. Mist rolled in off the grey waters and the waves gnashed white teeth that I could just glimpse now and again through the low bank of clouds. It was coming in thick and fast, and I had to watch my feet as I strode in order to not trip over the hillocks of storm-spat kelp that littered the coast. They stretched out in sepia glyphs, in a language I could almost understand. I closed my eyes and they stayed in my vision, bright and strobing, the aftershocks of dreams.

The feeling was sudden and intense: that if I took a moment, I could read this sea-writing and know the secrets that came from the deep. A cold sharpness, marrow-deep, and it passed so quickly that I had to laugh in case I thought I was going mad. I had to mock myself. Not that it made me feel any better, but there's something about getting in the first hit against yourself that's always felt satisfying to me. No-one can tear me down more than I do myself. It's an idiot's armor against the world.

In trying to escape my mother's stupid call, I'd walked almost to

the river mouth. A handful of cuttlefish bones were scattered near the shoreline and a dead gannet lay with its beak pointing to the sky like a bleached sentinel.

No roving gangs of murdering children, though. So that was a bonus.

The river-water here was grit-filled, dirty with silt, but even so, I hopped off the edge of the crumbing sand bank and stood thigh deep in the cold rush of the estuary flow. I'd stepped into some other world. Not here, not there. Not anywhere.

I wished I could stay.

With a deep breath I turned around to walk back home and the mist billowed like a new sail, revealing three shapes staggering a little way from me, leaning against the wind as they crossed the dunes. I yelped in fear, and one ash-grey figure turned his muted face to me, his horns iron dark, curling like a ram's. I'd seen these three figures before, still and naked and robbed of speech, sitting on a bench in the art gallery.

My heart stuttered. Some kind of Cape Town artistic statement, like the cowled death in a boat on Liesbeek River. A bunch of university brats dressed up as the Butcher Boys.

Fuck them. I had to get home and catch a train into town. I still had the afternoon shift to prep for. Even here in the long lonely places, I wasn't going to get to run away from myself.

§

It was in the news the next morning. How unknown thieves had broken into the gallery and somehow made off with the Butcher Boys. Everyone seemed bewildered by the why as much as the how. *Students*, I thought again, and spent the rest of the week running coffees and cakes for sweating tourists with wide American accents, dressed in safari gear in an air-conditioned shopping mall. I didn't have the time or energy to notice any more talk about the stolen sculpture.

I heard about Jarry on the train a few days later. The Southern line had broken down just outside Dieprivier, and I was packed in

with a million other sweaty souls, wondering if this was hell or purgatory and deciding it was probably purgatory because hell would smell like brimstone not sun-warm piss and cheese Nik-Naks and dead things. The weather had turned strangely humid for summer, making everyone sticky-tired and mildew-scented. A constant shrieking hum razored the air like an army of invisible cicadas, fungus growing in odd places. Just the other day I had opened my tea tin to find a collection of silvery pearls—snail eggs—buried in among the composting oolong.

Now I was crushed on a graffitied seat on the train, hugging my laptop bag to my chest, my earphones buried in my ears like a protective ward against unwanted conversation and the interminable buzz, trying to avoid breathing too deeply, and half-listening to the jabber around me.

A million different languages spilling like warm wax, and the word that hooked me, that made me sit up a little straighter and almost forget the stench and the lateness and the sweat gathering like slug slime under my T-shirt, the word that almost made me forget about my shitty life—the word was *Jarry*.

Two men were standing close to me and their voices were a little different from everyone else's. Maybe that's what caught my attention. They spoke English like a foreign language, with a lilt and cadence I'd never heard before. I tried to place them. Tourists, certainly. From where?

"The old way into Jarry is closed now," said the one with his back to me. "The dream is ended."

His companion, who had eyes like bright dark fish, looked like he was having stomach troubles. He winced. "There will be other ways in. I'm sure of it."

"And if there were—do we want to go back? How long before we forget who we are, become part of the Long Road and see nothing more of this world? Perhaps it's better to stay here with the apes."

Were they rehearsing some kind of play? That had to be it. Actors using the wasted time on a stuck train to learn their lines.

The dream is ended. I wondered what the play was about.

Then a screech, a lurch, and the *chuff-chuff-chuff* of the groaning train as we set on our way once more. I glanced down at my watch. Forty-five minutes late. When I looked up, the men were moving, pushing their way through the crowd toward the end of the carriage. No more talk of Jarry and the Long Road. I settled back and closed my eyes. Maybe I'd catch some sleep before Valsbaai.

§

Jarry crawled into my head after that. I looked for it in dreams, in books abandoned yellowly in the leaf-clogged gutters, in the calligraphy of dead jellyfish, in the seal corpses that washed up stinking from the storms. But Jarry, whatever it was, remained as incomprehensible as the strange weather. My mother called two days after my birthday to ask if I could look something up on "the Google" for her. Instead I searched for Jarry, for a play about dreams, but there was nothing.

I forgot.

It was almost a month later when I saw the girl with the sign. Normally, I ignore people-with-signs. It's not that I'm a complete shit, it's just that I have only so many R5 coins to give out and after a while the eye contact makes me feel guilty. And, sure, I am guilty. Too rich in a world where most people are pretty much starving.

The girl was standing in the middle of the road, on the yellow-painted island, the sign around her neck on a piece of twine. She was staring blindly ahead and the wind from the passing cars whipped her hair around her head in a fury.

She wasn't asking for money or hand-outs or anything. The sign just said:

JARRY!!!
FIND A NEW ROAD
BEFORE THE JESUS COMES
JARRY!!!

Normally, I'd hurry past people like her, with her grime and her sour smell and her madness like a blanket all tucked up around her, but instead, I waited for the lights to turn red, then darted through

the stalled traffic. She didn't flinch as I came close, didn't flinch or wheedle or beg. She ignored me.

"Hi," I said. "Um, so, Jarry?"

The lights changed, cars revved and roared, rubbish smacked around our heels. Someone yelled something out of his car window as he passed us, but the wind dragged it away.

"On your sign?" I tapped the word. The first Jarry with its eleventy-billion exclamation marks, each drawn with a meticulous neatness in purple kokie pen. "What is it? Like, a place or something?"

I was starting to feel more than a little stupid. Her pale eyes were turned to the horizon and she didn't blink. What the hell had possessed me to come and make idle chit-chat to some weirdo with a sign anyway? A Jesus-freak with a sign, I should clarify. At least she wasn't trying to convert me or get me to repent or cower from some non-existent end-times.

"Yeah," I said. "Never mind." And just because I guess I wanted to throw her a little, to get some kind of reaction I said: "The dream has ended, anyhow."

She moved so fast I didn't even have time to stumble backwards or dodge. Her hand shot out and caught my wrist, fingers cold and tight like the rusted jaws of a pair of old pliers. "What do you know about Dreaming?" Her breath was cold. We were standing on a traffic island under a baking Cape Town summer sun and her breath was ice.

"Nothing." I shook my hand free. "Nothing, forget it, lady."

She shoved me hard in the chest, almost sending me backward into the traffic. "Stay away from Jarry, ape," she said. "Stay in your own stinking shit and misery."

I didn't have time for this. All I'd wanted was a liter of milk and a pack of Camels and to get back to my apartment where it was marginally cooler and I had a lifetime supply of illegally downloaded TV series that would probably only make it to South Africa in 3011. Jarry, cold breath and the Jesus. Apes. Just… nonsense words. Meaning nothing. I shook it away and ran.

By the time I got home, I'd played that damn encounter in my

head a million times. It wasn't like I could talk to anyone about it. Savvie was at work and she'd probably call me an idiot for “making first contact” anyway.

I could Tweet about how some crazy on the street just about gave me a one-way trip to the Saviour himself, or I could see if any of my friends were online and maybe I could mention something, because I couldn't get her words scraped out from my skull.

Not nonsense. True words.

I knew nothing about dreaming. I never remembered mine. So instead of talking to anyone, I smoked cigarettes because a girl has to have vices and I watched a show I'd already seen because the actors were adorable and the hoyay was strong, and I Instagrammed Savvie's cat because it was Saturday.

My hands shook. I smoked more cigarettes and pretended everything was okay.

What else was I supposed to do?

I met The Jesus in a bar, while I was busy turning wine into water. Snap. I was there alone because Sav had bailed on me, claiming that working in a bar had put her off them for life. Odd thing. So I'd left her with the cat and headed down the road to the only-mildly grotty *Hole*, got drunk enough to not care that I was a frumpy mother's failure, and found myself a skinny, pretty Jesus.

He was haloed under a lamp that curved down like a curious tulip, drinking something clear and sparkly from a glass frosted with tiny droplets. It's not like I was at the *Hole* trying to get laid, of course. More like I was open to the opportunity if it arose. Ha-ha, so many terrible puns. But that's the reason I noticed him. I'm a sucker for a pretty face. Envy, maybe.

And he was all Pretty Face. One of those boys that looks like he's just waiting for the ’80s to resurface so that he can dig out his mother's clothing. A long face and hair that stood out in every direction, a perfect collusion of natural curl and expensive product.

He was sketching. And it should have felt so put-on, so damnably coy and pretentious. So *look-at-me*. Somehow it didn't. I

took a seat close to him and ordered another glass of the house red (boxed; I'm no fool, but then again I don't come to the *Hole* to satisfy my exquisitely refined palate) and watched as his pencil danced across the paper, leaving a shadowy image behind.

"Did you draw that from your head?" Stupid question. It must have been. It's not like there was a three-headed dog sprawled out on the bar-counter.

Pretty Face looked up and he had a startled look like I imagined a deer would have, if I'd ever seen a deer. I saw a porcupine once. It's not quite the same thing, saying someone had a startled look like a porcupine. That's a totally different kind of startled.

One where you get a face full of black and white spines.

"I—" He just sort of sat there. Looking for an escape route, possibly. There would have been an awkward silence. Instead there was just an awkward mumbly indie guitar with whispery vocals.

So, All Pretty Face and No Pretty Brains. I was already spilling over with disappointment. At least the wine was good. What am I saying—the wine was terrible.

"No," he said.

Terrific. Forward motion on the conversation train. I put down my glass. "Uh-huh."

"I saw one once."

I wanted to laugh at him, to mock him before he could mock me, but he had this serious cast to his face, a sweet sort of innocence that made me bite back on whatever scathing retort I was fermenting. "In your dreams?" I said instead.

He laughed. It was a nice sound, all smoky and warm, like the last hour of a good party. "In the Dreaming."

"In Jarry," I snapped back, like the word had been sitting curled up on the back of my tongue, just waiting for the moment I would let it free.

"Yes," he said.

After a few seconds he closed his sketchbook, downed the last of his drink and took my hand. I let him, not because I'm an idiot, but because Jarry had already eaten into my dreams and I desperately wanted to go there.

We walked out into a night that had turned shivery; a cold front blowing in from the ocean. I rubbed my hands along my arms and watched him, watched his breath smoking. He was real. I didn't even know his name. I was drunk. Maybe.

Probably. *You should phone Sav*, I told myself.

"So," I said. "You know how to get to Jarry."

He was fiddling with his jacket zip. It had got caught in the strap of his little flat portfolio bag. "I did once," he muttered.

"But the old ways are closed."

"Yes." He looked up at me, frowning. He was even prettier when he frowned. It gave him the air of a confused lizard. "How do you know?"

I shrugged.

"Because you don't smell like someone who has been to Jarry."

"I do this thing. It's called bathing."

"No—" He brought one hand to his face, and covered his right eye. The other one stared at me unblinking. A little creepy, I'll admit. But we were still standing outside the *Hole*. There were people around. "You look wrong."

"Nice. I already get that shit from my mother, I don't need it from you." I turned to stagger back and he caught my arm, gently pulling me to him.

"Not—not like that." He smiled, shy as a schoolboy on a first date. "Your face is perfect."

Perfect. I'm an idiot, but it was still nice to hear a little flattery for a change.

"I meant," he said, "that you don't look like someone who has seen Jarry." His hand was melting-warm on my cold arm, and just for once, I wanted to hold on to the idea that something about me was worthwhile, even if I knew he was lying. And I wanted to know more. So sue me. "I haven't." I sighed. "Obviously."

"Ah." He lowered his hand, held it out to me. "I'm Sullivan. And I can get you there."

Pretty Face, Pretty Hands. Long fingers. Elegant. Fingers that

could draw the strange, the magical. Of course I shook his hand. "Euphemia," I said. "Shut up, my parents were weird, you get used to it. Call me Mia if the whole thing is too much."

"Euphemia."

"Exactly."

"It sounds like a drug."

I laughed. "Oh, hang on, is that what this is? Is Jarry a trip?"

"Yes," said Sullivan. "The best." Then he shook his head. "It's not—it's better than drugs. It's marvelous."

I'm not even going to pretend I wasn't having massive second-thoughts by this point.

"There are still ways into Jarry, there always are, but the main portico collapsed, so everyone ape-side is trying to find a new way back and it's all a bit chaotic right now…." He waved his Pretty Hands around.

"Ape-side?"

"Where the humans live."

"Ah." I edged sideways. It was too cold out here anyway. Chatting with Pretty Face Sullivan had been entertaining, but we were now steering the Good Ship Conversation far past the Harbor of Mildly Amusing into the uncharted Seas of Uncomfortably Weird. "Perfect."

"You can't help being human," and he said it so sincerely. Perhaps it was his voice. I was being hypnotized. That's it. Totally hypnotized. "It's not your fault."

"Ah." My conversational train had derailed. I didn't exactly have a lot of responses ready for this sort of thing. "What are you then?"

"A go-between." When he smiled, I swear it all made sense. "Now, come on. There's supposed to be a slipway to Jarry here, but it's temperamental at best. Takes a bit of thumping before it works."

"And you know this how?" I followed him, every molecule of my brain screaming, but damn me, I followed him anyway. "I thought you'd only used the Old Way."

"An angel told me."

"Right. Angel." I nodded.

"Yes, exactly. Zaile. He was drunk at the time and I had to trade him a starling-bowl for the information, but Zaile's Mundus-born." He was smiling again. "It will be there, and we will get it to work."

"Okay." I was fumbling with my phone, sending a message to Sav. *Near Hole. Chatting up weirdo. Pretty weirdo. Possible serial killer. Pretty serial killer. Not home in twenty send heavily-armed men.* "So how far is this doorway-thing?"

He stopped. We were literally half a block from the *Hole*. I could still see people lounging on the pavement, leaning against the walls, talking shit and smoking and drinking their craft beers. Safe. "Right here."

I tilted my head. Someone had stuck a poster to the wall. It was for a circus. Last year. Most of the poster was gone. Some scrawled graffiti, a damp patch that smelled like urine and a few weeds growing through the cracks. "It's… wonderful," I said. "I'm truly lost for words."

Sullivan slammed his open palm into the center of the crumbling brick wall, and I jumped. Beneath his hand, the wall shivered. Sullivan grinned.

And I saw Jarry.

§

It was night over the city and the stars hung in garlands across the sky, stars of silver and blue and red and green, like distant fireworks. The buildings were tall and narrow teeth, blackened in the indigo maw of the sky. It wasn't the sight of Jarry that made me draw a deep breath, like an infant's first, but the smell.

Incense and jungle green and parrot feather sweetness and a cinnamony musk, the air of a different world. Behind me, the *Hole* and the stink of beer and cigs, salt and stale fish faded, the empty ocean night falling away. I didn't even have to wait for Sullivan to speak, I stepped forward before anyone or anything could stop me.

The air was thicker here and my lungs had to work harder to draw oxygen from it. I took gulping breaths, filling my chest with a sweet taste that reminded me of pears soaked in whisky.

“Jarry,” said Sullivan, and his voice was loaded with emotion. I tried to place it. Relief? Perhaps. It was flooded with something close to tears, like it had been years since he had seen the city and was finally coming home.

“Oh my god,” I said. “It's real. It's really real.”

Sullivan didn't acknowledge me, probably because yes, it was really real and I was stating the fucking obvious. In my hand, my phone had gone dead—not just out of signal range or emergency call only, but utterly black. I thumbed the power button a few times, but nothing happened. With a short sigh of irritation I slipped the phone back into my pocket. Of course I wanted to Instagram this shit; it was the most exciting thing to happen to me since forever.

The skyline grew clearer as my eyes adjusted to the new world and the strange starlight. One of the buildings towered over the other, a huge window like a rose flowering on one side. We might not have churches quite like that in South Africa, but I'd have to be completely illiterate to not know a cathedral when I see one. It was massive though, far larger than anything I'd ever imagined.

“So the church even made it to other worlds?” I said, one finger pointed to the monstrosity. As if Sullivan wouldn't know what I was talking about.

He laughed. “The Cathedral still hangs on to its dreams of a new Jesus, but they're waiting for nothing.”

“You know that personally, do you? The Almighty drop you a line?”

Sullivan took my arm. “Even if there is one, he won't bother coming here. This is just a way-stop, a place where the lost souls drift. Purgatory, if you will.”

“So why the hell did you want to get back?”

“There's something I need.” He fumbled in his coat. “Listen, it's not exactly safe for you here. Stay too long and you'll forget you were ever anywhere else, and then you'll become part of the Long Road and never get back home.”

“Whoa—wait. What?”

He took a small blue egg out of his pocket and cradled it in his palm. “I can anchor you to earth, but you'll need to swallow this.”

“You're kidding.”

“Hardly.” He pressed the egg into my hand.

It wasn't actually an egg, just a tiny pale stone, no bigger than the nail of my pinkie. I closed my fist around it. Cold. And hard. Small enough to swallow whole. “And you want me to actually put this in my mouth—” I began.

“The sooner the better.” His eyes were fierce and dark here under the rainbow stars. “You really don't have much time.” His look softened. “Sorry, Mia. I'm worried. If you're trapped here, it would be on me, all that guilt. I simply took you, didn't warn you or anything. Please, for your own safety.”

The egg tasted of nothing. Just a moment's flinty coolness, and then I swallowed it down like I was taking a handful of painkillers the morning after the night before, dry and desperate.

I imagined that it sat heavy in my stomach, connecting me back to earth, but in reality I could feel nothing at all. “You're sure it will work?”

“Yes,” he said and his smile grew warmer, grateful almost. “Beyond certain.” He grabbed my arm. “And now, we'd best move, if I'm to make my appointment.”

I shook off his grip, but followed him anyway. Sullivan was walking briskly down a narrow road edged on either side by delicate spindly buildings draped in what looked like fairy lights. As I passed, I saw that they were all mismatched—some antique glass bulbs that looked older than dust, and some new and cheap, the kind you get at China Town for a couple of twenties.

“Detritus,” said Sullivan. “Stolen dreams.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Some of the more unusual residents can slip off the Long Road, into what they call Dreaming. Back into your world. And it is your world, to an extent.” He glanced back at me. “It was your world.”

“They… go back in time?”

“About fifteen minutes or so behind, yes. They take what they can, and bring it back here to trade. There are also a few doorways that do the same thing, but they're expensive to use.”

“Oh.” I didn't really have anything intelligent to say, I realized,

but just about none of this made any sense. It had all the logic of a dream. I wasn't convinced that I was not actually dreaming. The whole thing had taken on a menacing eeriness: things brought back from the past, dream-nonsense and doorways to other worlds.

We walked the city of Jarry, heads bowed as though we didn't want anyone to take notice of us. I saw things, of course. I couldn't help staring. Women dressed in bearskins, their great ursine heads like bizarre frightening helmets, men in sackcloth and ashes, wearing gilded crosses almost as big as my hand, people with thin faces, their eyes like shifting mist. Three ashy figures wearing curling horns, naked, their mouths sealed. Butchers. They nodded at me as I past, their black eyes full of secrets they couldn't tell me.

I didn't think I liked Jarry very much. My hand pressed against my stomach, just under my ribs. Staying here was becoming less and less appealing. Sullivan's egg had better work.

Finally, Sullivan led me to a small arched door sunk halfway into the ground, down a little half-flight of stairs marked in a checkerboard pattern. There was a painted wooden sign just above the door, swinging idly in the faintly perfumed breeze.

Die Eend en Esel.

"Tell me purgatory is not full of repressed Afrikaans Calvinists," I said. "The Duck and Donkey? Really?"

"It's as good a name as any, and besides, you can be sure that no-one here even remembers what it means. It's gibberish from the past. Probably stolen," Sullivan added. He stepped down and pushed the door open. Chatter and smoke and the rapid scrape and whine of a fiddle spilled out into the night. "Come along," he said. "We're letting the stink out."

Inside *Die Eend en Esel* the crowd were mussels in a tide pool, shoulder to shoulder, pressed thick and black and salty, their voices and laughs braying and rolling. People were dressed in mismatched fashions, like they'd raided a garage-sale black bag of unwanted clothes and tried them on with no regard for style or color or, indeed, anything. One tall woman was wearing a curtain tie-back as a necklace, the tassel hanging between her breasts like a tired dancer.

Sullivan elbowed his way toward the back of the pub, and I

trailed in his wake, muttering *excuse-mes* to no-one who was listening.

Finally, we came to another door, this one closed. A few raps and a hurried exchange, and we were in, the door shut behind us and the noise muffled.

"No," said a small man, sitting on a stool in front of a large wardrobe. "It doesn't matter what you pay me, it's not going to work. Passage to Mundus is beyond your reach, not with that face." He took off the long top hat he was wearing and squinted. "What's this you brought?"

"Tor."

"Sullivan." The man rolled his hat in his hands, his eyes glinting as he looked at me. "Answer the question."

"A way in."

He shook his head. "Oh no. The gates won't open for you and you know it. Mundus is closed to your signature."

Sullivan shrugged. "I'm aware of that. I'm also an avid reader, and a great follower of various Mundus-collectors and what they keep in stock." He pulled a second little blue egg stone out of his jacket pocket, and held it out between finger and thumb.

My stomach began to feel heavier, like that stone was growing in my body, weighing me down like a cat in a sack ready to be drowned. Sweat filmed my forehead and neck, despite the fact that I was shivering. I wanted to run, but where to? It occurred to me that even with this egg, I had no idea how to return to earth. My tongue was dry and heavy; my mouth filled with old meat.

Tor looked from Sullivan to me, his face twisted in thought, then turned away from us and unlatched the closet. The doors fell open, revealing a gauzy mist. On the interior walls were strange maps, marked here and there with rusted pins. "Well, you won't need these, you're going off-map," he said as he fiddled with the tacks, moving them about until they formed a small pattern on the very edge of the map, in a blank and empty nowhere. "This won't be cheap," he added over his shoulder.

"I expected as much." Sullivan leaned against one smoky wall and chewed at his thumbnail. "You want something from Mundus,

right?”

“Yes, and nothing too common, you hear? I'm taking a risk with you, cuckoo-stone or no.”

“Cuckoo stone?” I'd found my voice.

“This.” Sullivan twisted his hand, palming the little egg and bringing it up toward my face. It was identical to mine in every way, down to the faint speckled pattern. “See,” he said, and he took my hand in his free one, his palm hot and dry and comforting against my skin. He clasped his fingers in mine, like we were lovers. “I'm not exactly allowed into Mundus. Or, at least, my body isn't.” He clapped his hand over his mouth, and his throat worked as he swallowed his own cuckoo stone dry.

The feeling started in my stomach. My actual stomach, not my guts. A sudden hot pain like an ulcer. I doubled over, trying to pull myself free of Sullivan's grip but he only held tighter. I was sure his fingers were going to leave bruises between my knuckles. I wrenched harder but his hand was like iron.

No, like my own skin. It felt like trying to tear off a piece of my own flesh. I twisted, looked up at him.

His face shifted.

Every bone in my body cracked, snapped, lengthened and thickened. I felt myself growing heavier and taller and different.

And Sullivan grew smaller, his pretty-Jesus mask disappearing into a face I have grown up with, grown bored with, learned to almost-tolerate.

“What the shit?” I said slowly, and my voice was deeper, rough like smoke and barbed like wire. Sullivan's voice.

“Cuckoo stone,” said Tor, helpfully. “He's kicking you out of your flesh-nest.” He was still standing at the open closet. Behind him the gauzy portal-thing had started to thin, and I could just make out a huge onion-bulbed dome of a building. “Right by The Circus,” he added, to Sullivan. To Sullivan, who looked exactly like me. A plainjane, a nothing, a forgettable face, one that would attract the attention of no-one. “Couldn't have asked for a better place. Right in the thick of it.” Tor grinned. His teeth were small and even and yellowed. “I better get something good out of this, Sully, old lad.”

“Call me Mia,” the girl said. My voice sounded higher and sweeter than I'd thought it actually did. Like hearing myself recorded. Mia let go of my hand and I fell backwards, all the strength out of me. I was left crumpled on the floor, barely able to move.

That's not me. It didn't matter what I thought—it looked like me, down to the swollen scratch on my neck where I'd been bitten by a mosquito last night. It was me. Without any actual me-ness inside it.

The Mia-Sullivan-thing dusted its hands down its new body and frowned momentarily before its face brightened. “Excellent.” Flushed with an eager light, it stepped toward the portal and brushed its fingers down the thinning veil. The grey mist parted, rolling back to reveal the onion-dome building clearly. From what I could tell the portal had opened in a doorway in a narrow street. It was shaded, and humid air seemed to seep into Tor's little room.

“Mundus,” Mia-Sullivan said. “Oh, you beauty.” And stepped through.

§

Now I walk the Long Road in a skin that is prettier than any I have ever owned. Sullivan's face and voice plastered over me. I walk it alone. Except for the mute Butcher Boys, who recognize something in me, some sea-side speck of a city they half-remember. They cannot talk to me, and no-one else will. With my pretty-Jesus face, with my long artist's hands, I am not welcome in Jarry. I try to follow the caravans of the Dreamers, hoping that one of them will dream me a way back home, but the years crawl past and I have forgotten the shapes of the kelp language and the spell I want to draw me once more to my ocean.

I walk the purgatory ring-road between the sound of the sea and the promise of a stranger heaven, my phone held out before me, waiting for some signal to shine in its black face. But I already know the dream is ended.

Our Lady of Arsia Mons

Caitlín R. Kiernan

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None of the four women and men assembled in the octagonal conference room were present when the chamber below the southwestern flanks of Arsia Mons, more than one hundred meters below the extinct caldera, was opened. Not one among them are field, though all have been trained for field work. They are each kept safe from the dirt and grime, from ionizing radiation, pathogens, the hazards of low gravity and decompression. The various perks of their position within the Conglomerate include this sanctuary. They keep their hands clean. They do not have to spend long hours in decontamination or worry about cave-ins. Here in their ivory tower, they gather twice daily to examine and discuss the fruits of their numerous subordinates' daily labors. On Mars, there are no Sundays off or holidays. On Mars, there are no unions and precious little in the way of safety regulations.

"I'm guessing we still don't know how the security protocols were breached," says the woman at the head of the long table molded from the same translucent Makroclear as the visors of the SAS walkabouts worn by the field scientists. Her name is Sayles, Chief Warrant Officer Tine Sayles, and she speaks with only the faintest hint of an Australian accent. Sayles makes no attempt to hide the salt-and-pepper of her long dreadlocked hair. Her clothing is immaculate, stylish, shipped all the way from the finest shops of the Carousel du Louvre and Dry Manhattan.

"Not an inkling," replies the man on her left. "It was a clean inbound hit. Whoever made the slice, the crackers left nothing whatsoever behind. So there's not much hope of a backtrace. Access Control is still double-shifting, but, you ask me, I think the best news we're going to get is that the mesh suffered no permanent damage."

"It's a goddamn PR nightmare," mutters the man to the right of

Sayles, and it may be he's muttering only to himself. "*That's* what it is, and who gives a shit *how* the worm got through. It got in, and it got out again, and even *if* the crackers are found, nothing's going to undo the damage." The man is the youngest of the bunch, the true color of his eyes concealed behind turquoise contact lenses. On Earth, he oversaw digs in Pakistan and the Zagros Mountains of Iran; on Mars, he's never even left HQ. He was born in Turkey on the final day of the bloody Ekmek Savaşları.

The fourth and final member of the Division is a slight woman in a banana-yellow suit. Her name is Emily Liang. Centered perfectly between her eyes is a tattoo she got while still in college—the kanji 兵—because she'd intended to sign up with the US Navy after graduation, but instead took a prestigious research position at Yale Geology. She stares at the headlines scrolling by on the feed suspended above the translucent table.

"'Death shall come on swift wings to him who disturbs the peace of the King,'" she says and chews the tip of a stylus.

"What?" asks Sayles, leaning slightly towards Dr. Liang. "What did you say?"

Liang points at the news crawl. "All these press comparisons between the Jeanne temple and the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen," she replies. "I'm surprised none of the casters have decided to run with the Curse of the Pharaohs angle. The deaths of Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon and the others who financed the excavation and opened the tomb. Now, wanna talk about drumming up ratings? That would do the trick."

"Right now," says Sayles, "I think they're plenty enough happy with talk of aliens."

"Still, she's right. Pissing off the Gods of the Red Planet," says the man on Sayles' left, after permitting himself a quiet, brittle sort of laughter. His name is Jack Doran, and he's a Conglomerate man, through and through. One of the cut-and-dried, petri-custom-grown for the job under the IVF program instituted in 2152 after all those chatty androids proved unreliable. "Here we are, arrogantly angering the very God of War. What would the wrath of the Kings

of Egypt be by comparison?"

No one answers the question, which all four understand is entirely rhetorical, and neither do any of the other three laugh. There's maybe half a minute's worth of silence, and then CWO Sayles sighs and says, "So we put this mess behind us, and we get on with the work. The work is all that matters."

There's a general murmur of agreement from her colleagues. Still, Doran points out there will be a formal inquiry; there's simply no way around that.

"We cross that bridge when we come to it," Sayles tells him. Sayles is given to clichés. "Right now, we stay focused on what Exploratory's bringing up from the temple."

Emily isn't comfortable with the assumption that the discovery below the skylight *is* a temple, and she's said so repeatedly. But, as Sayles might tell her, now is not the time to beat a dead horse, so Liang doesn't press the matter.

Sayles motions to the greenish stone artifacts arranged in a neat circle at the center of the table, each one supported on its own molded pedestal of Makroclear. Then she uses the same hand to shut off the feed above the table.

"This morning I received a directive to switch our attention from the general layout and architecture of the tomb to particular relics recovered from the site."

"And it came from—?" asks the man with turquoise contact lenses. His name is Kağan Çetinkaya.

"Not that the directive's provenance actually matters, but it came from Dominic in corporate. Now, can I continue?"

"Please do," he says. He and Liang exchange scowls that are not missed by Sayles.

"As you know from the reports, all seven of these were recovered a week ago from niches in the north wall of Tier Four, Quadrant Twenty-Seven. One of the chief ways, of course, that they are remarkable is that none were the least bit dusty. Another is that each is carved from porphyry, which as you should also know has, surprisingly, yet to be discovered onworld by the survey's teams. It certainly should be here somewhere, given the requisite

dynamothermal metasomatism certainly occurred at various times in the past. Indeed, preliminary isotopic analyses indicate the rock is native, and I've been asked to set aside the fact that porphyry deposits have not yet been located."

Liang adds, "And the sculptures are being considered as a priori evidence that they eventually will be found."

"Precisely," continues Sayles. "Plus, we've covered the petrological curiosities exhibited by the constituent talc, chlorites, and amphiboles, relative to terran porphyry. Deviations from the expected refractive index, pleochromism, specific gravity, diaphaneity, and etcetera. Old news. But. Now, look at them a moment, and afterwards I'm going to stress some of the highlights from today's dossier."

"Look at them? What the hell for? Have they changed since yesterday?" asks Çetinkaya. "Because, if not, I've seen enough of the damn things to last me a lifetime."

"Kağan, trust me," Sayles tells him "Your previous reactions have been duly noted and logged. Now, shut up and look at them anyway."

"You having bad dreams again?" Liang asks Çetinkaya.

"Fuck you," he mutters.

But he does as he's been told—they all do as they've been told—and sit silently staring at the objects from the tomb. After five minutes Sayles breaks the silence.

"Excellent. Now, have a look at the briefing, second page."

Liang, Doran, and Çetinkaya each pull up page two. Doran is the first to speak, and he only whispers "Extraordinary."

"Fuck all," Çetinkaya says and looks at Tine Sayles. "What *is* this bullshit. Is this some sort of joke, payback from corporate over the security leak?"

"We had nothing to do with the leak," Liang says, speaking almost as softly as had Jack Doran.

"You think the swells give two shits who was responsible?"

"The Board has many fine qualities," Sayles chimes in, "but I haven't found a sense of humor to number among them. The report's genuine. You can check the references if you think

otherwise. A shame one of you isn't an art historian."

Jack Doran laughs again and magnifies one of the images in the dossier. "They're almost indistinguishable."

"To be precise," says Sayles, "if you check Table 7, you'll see that laser sweeps turned up mean deviations of less than .052 percent on every one of them, which is, in and of itself, rather remarkable."

"I don't care. I'm not buying any of this," Çetinkaya declares and pushes his chair away from the table, turning to look out one of the clear walls at the vast expanse of the Tharsis. He gazes in the direction of Arsia Mons and the cavern skylights, mercifully much too far away from HQ to see with the naked, unaugmented eye.

Liang shakes her head, more in amazement than disbelief. Since the discovery of the temple, she's learned to accept an awful lot of strange shit. "You're asking us to believe a man carved essentially identical versions of these things two and a half centuries ago on Earth."

"No. For now, I'm only asking you to consider this… anomaly."

"Anomaly," mutters Çetinkaya. "I need a drink."

Liang extends her right hand, actually reaching for the artifact designated KSZ7812, though handling the objects is strictly forbidden. Her fingers stop only millimeters from receiving a painful shock from the electric barrier encircling the seven pedestals. She pulls her arm back, stares a moment at her fingers, then begins reading the dossier more closely.

"We'll reconvene after lunch," says CWO Sayles and stands up. But she's the only one of the four who leaves the octagonal room.

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Excerpt from TXO Brief TM/ex2/ Sol 298/Nevada 28-7-2141:
EYES ONLY/CTS
RE: recoveries KSZ7818-KSZ7814 (T4/Q27)
Fr: "THE QUIRKY QUIXOTIC KINGDOM OF HENRY CLEWS JR."
[Lannie Goodman, The *Sienese Shredder*, 2007]—
{=In the complex cosmology of the world according to Clews, this particular species is the fallen aristocrat of the roaring twenties—a

debauched alcoholic gambler, portrayed as a smirking hippo head with half-closed eyes whose curvaceously feminine body of feathers is supported by hideous clawed legs.

Typically, Henry Clews' thinly disguised pun on "hypo-critter" reflects the autodidactic artist's approach to all his creations, whether sculpture or literary drama––the use of wit and neologisms to spin out his complex web of personal obsessions. As a renegade from the stultifying 1890s high society of "Old New York" (as described by his contemporary, Edith Wharton), Clews evolves from an erratically brilliant prankster and college flunky into a self-appointed philosopher on the moral weaknesses of humanity. Both childlike and vituperative, Clews reigns with wicked glee over his own private Eden within the fortressed walls of La Napoule, which he recreates stone by stone, engendering an entire family of modern gargoyle demons and spirits.

These creatures, carved in precious blocks of pink, grey and green porphyry, also reappear in the columns of the cloister, the walnut arches of the dining room, and various other unexpected nooks and crannies all over the castle. Reminiscent of the hybrid animal kingdoms of Hieronymus Bosch, Lewis Carroll and Dr. Seuss, they comprise a stylized mix of cultures and species: Oriental, Hindu, Inca and African-featured cross-breeds of fish, crustaceans, birds, reptiles, monkeys and predatory beasts. Among the zoomorphic cast of characters, for example, are the *Shug* (a parrot with elephant feet and a lizard's tail); the *Og of Octopi* (a long-tentacled half bird, half octopus); the *Shat of Snakes*; the *Doodles of Dukes*; the friendly *Gilk of La Napoule*; the wrinkled *Goohoo of Frogs*; the *Gamanyune*, bird of illomen; and the ubiquitous *Jins*, laughing gnomes who haunt the chateau.=}

Recorded: 10

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WHERE I END AND YOU BEGIN (THE SKY IS FALLING IN)

No one makes it to Mars, or any sort of cherry position within the Conglomerate, unless they are the best that can be bought. No one retains those positions for very long unless they continue to perform, or preferably exceed, the acumen displayed when they were promoted from this or that grunt status. This fact has often been a source of both pride and motivation to Dr. Tannishtha Bandopadhyay. She escaped the floating slums of Calcutta when she was seventeen, won a scholarship to Oxford, and she's never once looked back. Her parents are dead, so there isn't much *back* there, anyway. All the better. She's been Marside for almost two Earth years, and she figures, with luck and continued hard work, plus her name on just the right publications in only the most prestigious journals, and she can retire in another ten years.

None of this is to say that she wanted to come to Mars, and none of this is to say that she's grown any more comfortable being here than the day her ferry landed at the Tharsis docks. But you do what you have to do, right? You do what it takes. You don't question opportunity. You certainly don't tell the bigwigs in personnel you'd be happier staying in Nevada or California or Texas. She went where they sent her, like a good little soldier, and she's doing her time as if it were a reward. Because it is.

The psych wing of the HQ infirmary is larger than a lot of people back on earth would expect, and it's certainly much larger than the Conglomerate would like anyone to know. Tannishtha was surprised when she first saw it; there'd been nothing in the orientation to indicate that it took up an entire floor of the infirmary. But, turns out, the bleakness and hostility of Mars is anything but good for the human mind. Also, it turns out there's a company policy against sending anyone home who isn't as sane as the day they left. Which, to date, has meant that no one admitted to the psych ward has gone home. The truth is that the residents of the

infirmary are more accurately considered prisoners than patients, something Tannishtha came to realize—and accept—very quickly.

While the lock confirms the DNA sample from her cheek swab, she pulls her hair back into a tight ponytail and waits. Then the door opens with a loud click, and she steps inside the room assigned to Patient 35, a young anthropologist from Idaho. Her name is Clay, and she's knotted her blonde hair into innumerable tangles. No one's tried to stop her. No one's seen any *point* in trying to stop her. She has bigger problems than tangled hair, which means the psych department also has bigger problems than her hair.

Tannishtha checks the chart set into the wall to be sure the patient's taken her morning regimen of anti-psychotics and sedatives, and then she sits down on a stool across from Clay's bed. The patient is sitting up, her back against the plastic wall. Her blue eyes are glassy, and she's smiling in a stupid, absent sort of way.

"How are you feeling today?" Tannishtha asks her.

There's a lengthy pause while Clay twists her hair with an index finger. "How did I feel yesterday," she finally replies. "How did I feel the day before that?"

"But you're sleeping better. That's what your chart says."

"I'm sleeping more, not *better*. I'm sleeping more, so I see more of Hell than before. Please, don't ever confuse *more* with *better*. Please don't do that."

"I apologize. I suppose I was being hopeful, on your behalf."

Clay stops twisting her hair and sits up straighter, uncrossing her legs so her calves and bare feet dangle over the edge of her bed.

"Hope," she says. "Did you know Hesiod wrote that after Pandora let all the evils out of that box, she shut it before hope could escape? I understood that, and I knew something else, looking into the heart of light, the silence… of light. I don't need your hope. I don't *want* your hope."

Tannishtha scratches an eyebrow, purses her lips without thinking about it, and reviews the records floating in the otherwise-empty space between her hands. She tries not to linger on the way that her patient spat the word *hope*, spat it at her, but it's impossible to do otherwise.

“Can we talk about that? How you feel about hope?”

"Didn't we just do that?"

"I'd like you to elaborate, if you can."

“And if I do, can I go back to the dig?”

Tannishtha sighs. “You know I can’t authorize that, and I believe you know there’s no one else who ever will.”

Clay stares up at the low ceiling a moment. “Why? Why are they keeping me away? I’ve seen more than *any* of you, so they’re keeping me away? I’m the only one it’s *spoken* to, and they’re keeping me away?”

“Going back to the site will only make you sicker, Clay. You understand that. I know you do.”

“I’m not sick. Why is it everyone keeps telling me how sick I am and pushing the meds down my throat, shooting them into my arms, when I’m *not fucking sick*.”

Tannishtha Bandopadhyay still hasn’t taken her eyes off the holo between her hands, and she replies, without looking up, “There are five suicide attempts that suggest otherwise. There’s the attack on Dr. Sazerac. There are the nightmares, the seizures, the hallucinations. I don’t think you need to hear the entire list.”

Four hours after the doors to Quadrant Twenty-Seven were unsealed, and three minutes, four seconds after the seven sculptures were discovered sitting neatly in their niches, Clay stabbed Peter Sazerac, using a ceramic shard she’d picked up off the temple floor, piercing his bio-suit and leave a nasty gash just above his left femoral artery. By the time she was subdued and medics got her back to HQ, she was presenting all the symptoms of schizophreniform disorder Type B. Yet she was responding to none of the treatments for SD-B, including an experimental retroviral. But Tannishtha knows no one in the Conglomerate gives a shit whether or not Patient 35 would ever again be sane; they care only what appeared to have triggered her illness.

Clay’s the sole person who touched one of the objects that she calls the idols. Before anyone could stop her, she’d picked up one of the green soapstone artifacts. Sazerac had tried to intercede before her hand reached it, but he’d been too slow. He’d also been too slow

getting out of her way afterwards.

Tannishtha looks up and stares for a moment at the faintly glowing admittance code tattooed just beneath Clay's jawline. There is a chip implanted underneath it, and an explosive charge about the size of a grain of sand. No one has ever escaped from the ward, but if they ever do, the charges will ensure they don't get far.

"It was oily," Clay says.

"What was oily?"

"Greasy. The stone was greasy. Oily."

Tannishtha taps the tip of her nose twice, three times, then she asks, "Did you want to touch the idol?" She always asks that same question; it's on the mandated form, and she has no choice.

"I'm tired of answering that. You know what I'll say."

"Then say it again, and we can move along to something new, okay?"

Clay rocks forward once, then slams the back of her head against the wall with enough force that Tannishtha is startled, even though she's seen Clay do the same thing many times before. Tannishtha has recommended that the patient be fitted with a headguard, but, so far, she's been ignored.

"Please," she says, "don't do that."

Clays smiles. "I might hurt myself, and then where would the company be?"

"And what do you think will happen if you do, Clay? If you do hurt yourself? You know how it is, or at least you think you do. What do you expect is the likelihood they'll just find someone else to touch the stone?"

"Very high," Clay replies. "But it doesn't matter."

"Please, it's only one question. Answer it, and we can move on."

"I wanted to touch it," Clay says, and her smile becomes a grin, even as tears begin streaming down her cheeks. "I've never wanted anything else so badly in my life. I never will again, unless it's a second chance."

"A second chance at what, Clay?"

Instead of answering the question, Clay rubs her head and stares at the psychiatrist, and, finally, she asks, "What's a shoggoth?

Have you ever heard that word, Dr. Bandopadhyay? Have you ever heard of a shoggoth?"

"No," Tannishtha replies. "I never have."

"I've dreamed of them, of shoggoths, and I still can't tell you what they are. I dreamed of a march of monsters, and they sang, and a mountain walked before them."

"A mountain walked?"

Clay frowned slightly and shrugged her shoulders. "From the blackness between the stars," she whispered, "fiery the angels fell, burning… and as they fell, deep thunder rolled, indignant, burning."

"That's William Blake," Tannishtha tells her.

"Is it? I'm not sure I've ever read William Blake."

"Where did the angels fall, Clay?"

For a long time, Tannishtha is silent, waiting on Clay to reply. When it's obvious she isn't going to, Tannishtha repeats her earlier question.

"If you ever had a second chance at what, Clay?"

"You know that answer, Doctor. A second chance at touching the other six."

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THE BEFORE

July 21st, 2141 (MTC 36/3/2459416.5):

Bench McDermott struggled with the dragger's stick, shifting into third as the engine whined and clattered and the control panel began to glow orange with the comingling of yellow and red warning lights. There was a pop, so he knew one of the rear induction coils had blown, probably the very same one he'd had replaced back in Biblis, only twelve days before. He cursed, then began the ailing vehicle's shutdown sequence, flipping the row of toggles above his head.

Nonny Lasseter was riding shotgun, and she scowled and clicked her tongue once against the roof of her mouth. "Didn't I tell you?" she asked. "Didn't I say that tweezer was a bloody goloph, out to rob you blind? Didn't I just?"

“You’re not helping,” he grunted, as the engines began to power down and the treads ground to a clanking halt.

“We’ll be lucky we make the next stead,” she sighed and began digging about in a pocket of her grimy blue coveralls. “We’ll be lucky we don’t die out here on the flats.”

“Let’s remind me again why I hired you?”

“Can’t find your dick in a whorehouse, that’s the why, short and simple.” Which was true. So, Bench had always hired a navigator to read the scans and topo charts while he drove. She was Mars-born and could suss out terrain backwards, forwards, and sideways, and she’d come as highly recommended as any. Didn’t hurt she was jake with a spectrometer too, not when an olivine safari meant payoff or bust. But none of that stopped her from being a pain in the scrotum. He’d only taken her on because his last navigator had quit when another prospector offered him double what Bench was paying.

“Weather blowing up,” Nonny said and pointed through the windshield towards the southern horizon. “Expect we’ll be here till it passes, yeah. Not time to patch this heap forehand.”

Bench squinted in the direction Nonny had indicated, saw the roiling smudge there, cursed, then switched on the eye, and waited while the doppler screen reluctantly flickered to life. And there it was, a duster sweeping up from the plains above Echus Chasma and the great gash of the VM beyond. Not a huge storm, a cat one-five, maybe. But still nothing he’d want to be out in with only a soft suit.

“Well, least she’s not a blaster,” Nonny said, her eyes also on the screen. She tapped it once with a stubby finger. “Should pass in a few hours. Catch some shuteye meantime, ain’t gonna do us no harm.”

“Didn’t haul my fat ass out here to spend half a day sleeping next to you, Nonny.”

“Could do worse," she snorts. "Fair expect you have.”

Bench pressed two buttons on his left, near the pilot’s release hatch, and the dust guards (which also needed to be replaced) groaned and began to slide over anything and everything that the storm might scour or gum up. He left the windshield open for now.

He'd close it at the last minute. Bench didn't like sitting blind.

"Want some emma?" Nonny asked, popping the lid off a pill bottle. "Sweet merch courtesy the fine, fine chemos at Galilei." She fished out three of the pills and dry-swallowed them.

"I also didn't come out here to chase with you, Nonny. Been clean seven years, and I ain't about to backslide now."

"Your loss, boss man." She laughed and put her stash back into her pocket.

And that's when Bench spotted something moving between the dragger and the oncoming storm. At first, he took it for a trail of dust devils, sweeping along like heralds of the blow. He watched, and believing he was seeing nothing more than a few twisters, watched only half-interested. In a couple of minutes, Nonny Lasseter was asleep in the navver's seat, snoring loudly enough it was unlikely he'd hear the storm when it finally reached them. With most of the vehicle offline, everything but the life support and the central AI, the silence and stillness was beginning to make him nervous. The quiet out on the flats could smother a man, and it always got to Bench, sooner or later. Usually, he had the cacophony of the dragger to keep it at bay. When he didn't, which was an increasingly frequent state of affairs, he had his music. Bench wasn't much for the nowdays crap spewed out from Earth, but the dragger's brain had a decent library of old tunes from the mid and latter twentieth to soothe and console. He called up "Hey Jude," set it to repeat, and leaned his seat back, unbuckled the safety harness, and settled in for the wait, however long it might prove to be.

It occurred to him, partway through the first chorus, that the dust devils hadn't registered on the radar. *Probably a glitch*, he thought, glancing at the screen. He thumped it a couple of times, which usually did the trick. Thing likely had a short somewhere in its innards. But the display didn't change. There was the storm at the top, sixteen kilometers and closing fast. But there was nothing reading *between* the dragger's coordinates and the storm.

He looked at the windshield again and asked the AI to bump the resolution and to magnify by fifty.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't.

Alas, how terrible is wisdom
when it brings no profit to the man that's wise!
This I knew well, but had forgotten it,
else I would not have come here.

That was the first thing in his mind, that nasty snatch of poetry, though he had no idea where or when he'd heard it. He'd made it through three years of college before shipping out, and in between the courses on geology, physics, engineering, and suchlike, he'd had to suffer through a few lit elects, so probably he'd picked it up there and the words had lain dormant in his brain ever since.

This I knew well, but had forgotten it,
else I would not have come here.

What is it I'm seeing? he thought, praying he wouldn't find the answer. *What the fuck is it I'm seeing?*

The procession marched along, west to east, swaying this way and capering that, flapping, lurching. It was hard to tell how many of them there were, because in places the creatures seemed to bleed together, one into the next. They were enormous, the tallest of them easily thirty meters high, some surely sixty meters long. Nothing alive was that big. Nothing alive had *ever* been that big. He thought, *A mountain walked*, and then he pushed the thought away.

Hey Jude, don't be afraid…

Bench shut his eyes, then opened them again, but the parade of monstrosities was still right there. *Don't look. Don't look, and you won't see. Don't look, and they won't see you.* But no one survives the hardscrabble by lying to himself, and so Bench did look. He looked long and careful. He considered trying to wake Nonny, but she was deep in the grip of the emmas, and she'd be out until they wore off.

"Dragons," he whispered to himself, as there was no one else to hear. "That's what they are. They're dragons."

They weren't dragons, of course, but somehow it was easier to watch the creatures once he'd put a name to them.

That's when he noticed that his left hand was on the airlock lever, and a second later the computer warned him in its tinny, genderless voice that neither the dragger's cabin nor its occupants were prepared for exposure, and he quickly pulled his hand back. But the marching things were singing, he realized, and they were singing to him. They were calling him to join them. There would be this one opportunity, and then there would never be another. Never, ever again. He told the AI to begin filming, and the recorder hummed to life. He sat there, disbelieving, yet certain he wasn't hazing, though he wished to Hell and Heaven that he were.

They *weren't* dragons…

And don't you know that it's just you, hey Jude…

… else I would not have come here.

Before the storm reached the procession, it had passed from view and taken its song with it. And when the sand and the wail of the tempest finally enshrouded the dragger, Bench McDermott was more grateful than he'd ever been in all his life.

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Peter Sazerac (Doc Pete to his team) sits on the floor and stares into the cylindrical holding tank where his softsuit floats suspended in the bluish gel the chemo geeks call "the soup." In fact, it's a complex emulsion of hypersterile organic and inorganic compounds—a finely tuned and constantly monitored environment that allows the living cells to survive indefinitely free of their human host. The suits still give him the creeps, no matter how many times he's donned his. Back in Nevada, his body was meticulously laser-scanned, and a wax model was created, from which a custom-made culture mannequin was then crafted, around which the suit was grown, beginning with a hybrid of stem cells and a sample of his own DNA. The resulting cloned organism is as alive as Peter Sazerac, though so many mutations were introduced during the process that it's hardly an identical clone. The "skinbag" also possesses a biomechanoid prong that links with a surgically implanted port at the base of the wearer's skull, entering the cerebellum, temporarily allowing the

suit and the host to act as a symbiote. The suit is a highly modified human slipcover, capable of withstanding all the environmental factors inimical to unprotected walkabouts.

"It's healing nicely," says Oklahoma, as the door slides shut behind her. Her real name isn't Oklahoma, but she was born in Norman and picked up the nickname during basic. It stuck. "No need to wait three months for a replacement."

"That would have been a fucking situation," he replies, though there's a part of him that has no desire to ever set foot in the temple again. They've only gone so far as the area dubbed the anteroom. But there's that other part of him, the part that made him a scientist, then led him to Mars, that aches to know what lies beyond the anteroom.

Oklahoma stands beside him, and she places one hand against the tank. "The graft seems to be taking perfectly. Clay did a number on you. How's the leg?"

"I'll live," he tells her. "They say I'll be good to go in a week or so."

"I'm always surprised at how warm these tanks are," Oklahoma says. "Any word on Clay, how she's doing?"

"You're kidding, right? The ward's got her now, and it always will, till death do them part."

"Yeah, the ward's got her now. I don't know why I asked."

Oklahoma takes her hand off the cylinder and stares at it. "What do you think happened down there?"

"I'm trying not to think about it, truth be fucking told."

Peter hasn't taken his eyes off the tank. He counts the fingers and then the toes, none of which have nails. The skin is bare of even a trace of body hair, and the compounds in the flesh that repel cosmic rays give it the color and sheen of graphite. There are no nipples, no genitalia, no urethra, no anus, no ears. Where there should be a face, there's only the Makroclear visor, tightly fused on a molecular level with the suit's epidermis.

"I checked, and her last psych profile was clean as the inside of that tube."

"If it wasn't, she wouldn't have been out there."

"I was just—"

"Don't sweat it, Oklahoma. I checked, too. I knew the results, but I checked, too."

She sat down beside Peter, then and took his right hand in her left. His palm was sweaty, and she wondered, briefly, if that was a side effect of the antibiotics or if it was anxiety. Obviously the latter. Obvious to anyone who'd been in the hole when they found the idols and Clay tried to kill him.

"You think they're ever going to let us see them again?"

"The artifacts?" he asks, finally glancing at her. There's something about her close-cropped auburn hair that always surprises him. There's a clove cigarette tucked behind one ear.

"I have a feeling the most we're ever gonna get is holos. Probably damn decent holos, but I'm pretty sure they're not going to chance another incident like Clay."

"But you believe they're going to send us back down the shaft?" he asks.

"I don't think they have much of a choice. The Board's not about to shut down the expedition, and they sure as hell aren't going to settle for remotes. We're dispensable, replaceable with only a minimum of inconvenience and expense. They've already named Clay's replacement, right? I figure the only thing the tops are worrying about is that slice job and the PR mess back on Earth. But even *that's* not going to stop them."

"You were always this cynical, weren't you?"

"Only since grade school," she smiles, then uses her free hand to brush his greying bangs from his face. "You need a haircut."

"Just now, I need a lot of things."

"Including a haircut."

He reaches out with his free hand and lightly thumps the tank. "I'm making up for baldy in there, okay?"

Since their last walkabout and that emergency extraction, the team's hardly spoken to one another. There's been nothing much but the debriefings, and of course those were one on one with the security officers. Still, Peter has no particular desire to discuss the subject, but he knows that's Reason Number Two for Oklahoma's

visit, so he's ready for the questions when they come.

"From what I saw before she cut you, they weren't all that different from the carvings outside the temple, those hideous fucking gargoyles on the columns and capitals and the doors and shit. Sure, the idols didn't look like basalt, but they were the same style—I don't know what an architect would say—but the same style."

"Why does everyone keep calling them idols?" he asks.

Oklahoma frowns and stares at him a moment.

"Well, what would you call them?"

"I don't know. But assuming they're idols is as premature as calling that place a temple. For all we know, they were part of some sort of art collection. I don't like all this assumption when we have almost no data to back it up."

She releases his hand and goes back to looking at the cylinder.

Peter sighs and rubs gently at the itching wound beneath his pant leg. "Okie, I'm well aware we have entered the land of freaky shit. I know that. But no one's going to benefit from speculation. My nightmares are bad enough as it is."

She shrugs, then apologizes. "Have you heard about Nzeogwu? She's asked for a discharge."

"No one's going to let us out of our contracts. The best any of this team can hope for from the Conglomerate is to wind up in the ward with Clay, plugged to the gills with haloperidol, chlorpromazine, whatever cocktail of neuroleptics they've decided will keep us quiet and docile. Or death on the next walkabout. I suppose that would work just as well, without the unpleasant side effects."

"Have you always been this optimistic?"

"Only since we opened those goddamned doors."

Oklahoma takes out her lighter, takes the cigarette from behind her ear before she realizes what she's doing and stops herself. "The skinbag should have protected her. When she touched it, the suit should have buffered crossover of any kind."

"How do you figure that?" Peter Sazerac asks her. "The axons in the suit's fingertips, its entire peripheral nervous system, feeds

straight back through the jack. There's no reason to think whatever she felt when she—"

"Doc, you're about to make one of those assumptions you were just railing against. Bad science, and we can't have that."

"Fuck you," he says, and she laughs. Then they sit together for maybe another half hour, just staring up at the bio-suit floating, only seemingly lifeless, and neither says anything else that matters.

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Chase Greco is what recruiters call a "hard red." She arrived on the Tharsis two weeks after the Conglomerate's R&D facility became habitable, led the detail that brought the HQ mainframe online after months of setbacks, and she's never left, and so far as anyone's heard, she has no intention of ever leaving. If asked, she usually responds with a curt, "What exactly would I be going back to?" After three years, she became Division Head of Systems Integration, which might seem more impressive—she's said this, too—if her staff consisted of more than two people. Still, the Board and their doppelgängers back on Earth know she's as crucial to their operations as any keystone in any archway ever built. Yank her out, it all goes tumbling down. More importantly, Chase Greco knows this, along with pretty much everyone else on the campus and all those Conglomerate stooges toiling away approximately 1.52 AU (± 0.14) across that inky hard vacuum. This has, she's discovered, made her pretty much untouchable. Most would use the word *indispensable*, but she prefers *untouchable*. This is not to say she pushes her luck on a regular basis, but it is to say she rarely takes shit off anyone.

Usually, Chase is a pretty happy little gremlin, perched there in her unlikely, and yet entirely logical, place at the top of HQs vicious trophic pyramid. But she's a little less so today, because her domain has been invaded by someone a step or two below her de facto level on said pyramid. The Board—by recommendation of the Exped Division—has cast down upon her a nervous bureaucrat by the name of John Smith. She thought that was a joke at first, until she

ran his creds, and sure as shit stinks, the son of a bitch's name is indeed John Smith. John *Mitchell* Smith in full, but still. Anyway, making fun of his name gave her a leg up right from the start, and she's taken every opportunity in the twelve minutes since to make John *Mitchell* Smith feel less and less qualified to be anywhere near her labs.

So, here's the scene: Chase and her two underlings—her on-again lover Dylan, and Maxwell, who annoys Chase, but is brilliant enough she endures him—sit together in the ASA sensory retrieval module. The module is a prefab resilience bowl, vacuum-molded from a static resistant titanium-epoxy alloy, seven meters across, three-and-a-half deep, every inch of its surface a lattice of state-of-the-art quantum hardware (augmented with intercalated gooware canisters), audio and video codec tackle, coolant lines, coaxial cables, power conduits, and optical fiber connecters. Access to the module is only afforded by an aluminum catwalk leading onto the operations platform suspended above the hive. Chase, Dylan, and Max sit in their chairs there on the platform and stare at Smith, and Smith mostly doesn't stare back at them. Chase is sucking on a cucumber-flavored Chupa Chup.

Intimidation accomplished, Chase thinks. *So all we have to do is get through this as quickly and as painlessly as possible, with no casualties on our side.*

"There are some unsettling rumors—" Smith begins, but Chase interrupts him.

"—trickling out to the alphas that there's something amiss with the data gathered by the suits the day B Team chopped the temple."

"And you're here, wasting our precious time, to ascertain the truth," adds Max, tugging at a stray thread on the left sleeve of his black sweater.

"Pretty much the case," Smith nods.

"Whatever we tell you, that's going straight back upstairs, and never mind the usual protocol, or am I wrong, Mr. John *Mitchell* Smith?" Chase asks him.

"You don't have to be such an ass about this."

"We don't like people looking over our shoulders," says Dylan.

Her sweater is identical to Max's; both have the blue and yellow Conglomerate logo stitched over the right breast, and both have seen better days. They only wear the damned things because they're free. "Especially not when the voyeurs in question are benighted snoops like yourself."

"But…" Smith begins, trails off, then starts again. "But you are aware that your report was due yesterday, and that was because Exped needed it yesterday."

"The Exped Four need to get laid more often," chuckles Max, then rotates his chair towards one of the monitors.

"Now, now," says Chase. "Be a good drone and show Mr. Smith what he's come to see." Then she turns to Smith. "So that he will fully appreciate why we've not yet finished our report. And, by the way, Mr. Smith, when's the last time we were tardy?"

Smith scratches his forehead a moment, then replies, "I've no recollection of you ever having been late, Dr. Greco."

"Which ought to clue you in, right there. Max, punch up Yamashita's feed, will you, and let's get this inquisition off the pad. Oh, and keep it skeletal, and begin a few ticks before the incongruities register."

"I assure you, it's no inquisition," Mr. Smith says, sounding at least a little taken aback. "It's only an informal visit."

"Whatever. Now, I'm assuming you might know the basics of how all this works, yeah? The skinbags are grown with an absolutely brilliant data acquisition and storage network, scooping up and saving—for us—almost every scrap of sensory and mental input experienced by the host. The network, it can read your mind, right? Plus, it sees what you see, hears what you hear, tastes what you taste, and so forth. Guy back in Canada thought this thing up, he's a billion-trillionaire fifty times over, I'm sure."

"I know the basics," says Smith.

"Smart boy that you are," Chase laughs and glances at Max. "Okay, so what you're about to see on Max's screen, that's the visual and auditory skimmed off Dr. Yamashita's ASA. He's the team geologist. We're cutting all the tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and mnemonic stuff because, *a*, I don't feel like rigging you up in the box,

and *b*, you haven't been conditioned, so that much charge would likely fry your brain like bacon. And we don't want that, now do we?"

"Hell, no. Not with budget reviews on the horizon," Dylan says, watching as the laser grid on Max's console sputters to life and projects a single beam of light towards the ceiling. In a few seconds it's unfolded—a phenomenon that never fails to remind Chase of the blooming of a rose or some other flower—into a three-dimensional scene, as seen from Yamashita's POV, recorded inside the temple. The scene hangs about half a meter above Max's head, and a hoop of constantly changing data encircles the bottom of the image, running counterclockwise around the projection.

"Now, you pay close attention, John *Mitchell* Smith," says Chase, pulling the Chupa Chup from her mouth with a distinct *pop*.

He doesn't reply.

The image clearly shows the anteroom, and Yamashita has just turned towards the niches set into one wall. Sazerac saw them first and has called everyone's attention to them. Lights cut through the darkness and play across the smooth grey basalt walls. This is Smith's first glimpse at the carvings tucked into each niche, and he immediately wishes his briefing had been just a bit more thorough. To say the things are grotesque is an understatement. Each one is clearly meant to represent some manner of organism, whether actual or imaginary, and all seem highly stylized in the same fashion as the bas-reliefs on the temple doorway and its surrounding columns and friezes. Yamashita's light lingers on something that reminds Smith of a raven perched on a cube. A lizard-like reptile is frozen in the act of slithering from between its claws, attempting to escape down the side of the base facing the geologist. Yamashita then turns to the next niche on his right, and this time the carving resembles nothing so much as an octopus with the feet of a hippopotamus and the folded wings of a bat.

"Ugly fucking shit," says Chase Greco, then puts the lollipop back into her mouth.

Yamashita and Sazerac are talking, and Smith also recognizes the voice of Morgan, the team's wet link. Sazerac clearly says, "I'm

not so sure that's a good idea, Clay. Let's use the claw." Clay has stepped into frame, and she's ignoring Peter Sazerac, laying the palm of her bio-suit on the polished head of the raven creature.

"Fine. Screw code," grumbles Sazerac.

"It feels odd," Clay says, sounding as though she's speaking more to herself than to the rest of her team. "Oily. It feels oily."

And then she pulls her hand away and steps back, and Yamashita's recording shows Morgan squeezing in between Sazerac and Clay. He carefully uses the three-pronged collection claw to lift the raven from its niche and transfer it to a plastic container. He looks sternly at Morgan, admonishing her for deviating from procedure.

"It felt oily," is all she says.

Sazerac, a moment later, sighs and says, "We'd best pull back. I want a sweeper in here before we go any further."

"You're shittin' me," Mary Nzeogwu (archeologist) complains. "And wait a week for the results?"

"Mary, we need to know what to expect up ahead, all right? We're not going to argue about this."

There are a few more exchanges between team members, but nothing of consequence. And then Yamashita has another look at the bat-winged octopotamus before turning away from the niches and exiting the anteroom with the others.

"She didn't stab him," Smith says, unable to take his eyes off the display. "What the *fuck*, Chase. Clay didn't fucking stab him."

Chase removes the Chupa Chup from her mouth again, licks it once, and nods. "Not according to Yamashita's feed, no, she did not."

"Then why the hell—?"

"Oh, you haven't seen nothing yet, John *Mitchell* Smith. Just you wait. Max, let's have Morgan's feed. Try not to foul your panties, Mr. Smith."

He watches as the scene plays out again, this time from Josiah Morgan's perspective. A lot of what he sees is the same—the walls, the niches, the hideous carvings—but most of the dialogue is different, though only subtly so. When Morgan steps forward with

the claw, Clay turns on him, plunging the five-inch shard of stone into his thigh, and the feed immediately ends.

"No way," Smith says. He opens his mouth to say something else, but Max is already playing Sazerac's feed. Again, similarities. Again, differences. This time, the feed ends with Sazerac lifting the sculpture from its niche, holding it a moment while Morgan asks just what sort of idiot he is, and Yamashita curses in a mixture of Japanese and Spanish. Clay asks if she can hold the thing, but then Sazerac is depositing it safely in Morgan's box. Sazerac holds a hand up in front of his face, and it gleams with a distinctly iridescent film.

"What are you people playing at?" Smith asks.

"Wanna keep going?" asks Dylan, trading him a question for a question.

"But she stabbed him. Clay, she stabbed Sazerac. We know that. She's even admitted doing it. Obviously, there were malfunctions in the suits."

Dylan shakes his head. "No, man. We ran diagnostics on the suits, combed them each five times over, nanometer by nanometer. The suits are up to spec."

"So," says Chase, "you see how we do have a problem, now don't we, Mr. John *Mitchell* Smith? And I assume, having witnessed this apparent paradox, you've come to grasp why we'll be somewhat longer than we usually require to produce a coherent report for Exped."

"No," he says, and, at first, Chase looks angry and confused.

But then Smith adds, "Purge the files. Purge all of it. And I mean irrecoverable, spic and span, and no private copies for yourselves, you understand me? *Nothing*. Erase the whole goddamn mess. No one needs to see that. *I* didn't need to see that."

Max looks even more baffled than Chase, and he peers over his shoulder at Smith. "You're fucking kidding, right? Whatever happened down there, it's going to fucking turn physics on its— "

"*Purge the files*," Smith says again. "Are you deaf?" And then he stands and walks quickly back across the catwalk, leaving the three hanging above the sensory module. When Smith is gone, they stare silently at one another for a time, make backups for themselves, then

begin the rigorous purge sequence.

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BLACK SHIPS SOUTH OF HEAVEN

Two hours, twelve minutes, and thirteen seconds after Mr. Smith exists the sterile dome housing SysIn and all of Chase Greco's miraculous toys, and two hours, eleven minutes, and fifty-seven seconds after she and her three compatriots reluctantly begin more or less complying with their orders, Mary Nzeogwu awakens from a dream of a hellish procession across Martian plains. In the dream, the creatures comprising the westerly parade were as clear as day, but their fearful symmetries begin, almost immediately, to fade from her conscious mind. What lingers is only the dread of knowing what she witnessed, and a sort of existential shock at her certainty that the nightmare and the discovery just beyond the doors of the temple are intrinsically and undoubtedly linked, one to the other, even if she can't see how. Her mind's eye has seen things beyond her ability to fully comprehend and, she knows, beyond her ability to bear.

She *can* still recall their titan feet and paws raising a pall the color of rust as they stomped along. And that she perceived a malevolent, triumphant joy in their every movement. She stood there alone, the howling wind tugging at her soft suit. The wind sang an old, old song she'd never heard, and yet she knew it was an old, old song. *Hey, Jude, don't be afraid…*

They marched, and she watched and listened.

Somehow, the abominations were linked to what the team had found beneath Arsia Mons. No, not somehow. Not somehow at all. It was the likenesses of these creatures that whoever had carved the seven sculptures had been trying—and largely failing—to capture. Perhaps they'd failed on purpose, she thought. Perhaps it was better that way.

They were led by a rough approximation of the idol that Yamashita was calling the "octopotamus." The thing was so enormous its bulbous head seemed to scrape the sky. And she thought, *A mountain walked or stumbled*, her mind struggling to make

sense of the spectacle. And Mary heard a second song then, a chant rising up from the parade: *Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.* It wasn't any language she recognized; indeed, it was so guttural, it hardly seemed like a proper language at all.

Iä! *Iä! Cthulhu!*

Iä! Iä! Shub-Niggurath!

As the Martian day faded to Martian twilight, she watched as they passed.

And she awoke, sweat-soaked and shivering; Mary Nzeogwu *barely made it to the toilet before vomiting. By the time her belly was empty, most of the dream was hardly more than the dim echoes of memories.*

She sits now before the mirror at the foot of her bed, staring back at her face, the cheekbones she inherited from her African mother and the blue eyes of her American father. There is an aspect of her face that has been altered by the dream, even if she can't put her finger on it, something more than expression. Something physical. The holo flickering between her hands reminds her, each time she dares to glance at it, that her discharge has been denied. When she first received the news, Mary fleetingly entertained an attempt at faking a psychotic break, but the neuros would almost certainly have revealed the lie, and even if they had not she knows too much about what goes on in the ward to which Dr. Clay has already been confined to condemn herself to that fate. Mary Nzeogwu is not insane, even after what she's seen below the volcano and what she's dreamt afterwards, and that's the most damning fact of all.

Baby, you're sure you want to do this? she hears her mother ask. *You're sure there's not another option?*

"Yeah, Momma. I'm sure."

Maybe if you…

—and—

Possibly…

—and—

Have you considered…

Mary has an answer at the ready for every one of the desperate suggestions she imagines her mother's voice asking her to please,

please consider.

"No, Momma. Nothing else will make it stop."

Then, Baby, you do what you need to do. But do it fast. Don't hurt. You've already hurt enough for two lifetimes.

"It'll be quick. I've made sure it'll be quick."

A mountain walked or stumbled.

… don't be afraid, take a sad song…

Which is the truth. She'd already planned and prepared for the suicide before the dream. She'd only needed one last push. One final, gentle shove. On the table beside her bed is a thin-walled glass ampoule of potassium cyanide. No, it wouldn't be painless, but it would be quick. She switches off the holo, sets the pad aside, and asks the computer to play Henryk Górecki's *Symphony Number 3*, Opus 36, and she stops staring at her face in the mirror. Mary takes the cyanide from the table, and she listens to the music until the second movement has begun before she places it in her mouth and crushes it between her teeth.

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The two women and two men assembled in the octagonal conference room at the long Makroclear table take the time they need to read through the morning's dossier: Sayles with her greying hair, Liang and her kanji tattoo, the vatter Doran, and Çetinkaya with his turquoise-tinted eyes. The seven pedestals still form a tidy ring at the center of the table, but the seven idols no longer sit atop them. Only Sayles knows for sure where they've gone, and the remaining three know she'll never tell them where they've been put. Even if she were asked. And none of them will ever ask, as none of them wants to be shuttled, unemployed and likely blacklisted, back to Earth.

"As you can see," Sayles says, with even more than her usual air of authority, "Central has initiated a complete redact of the findings. When they're done, access to the castle at La Napoule will be impossible. The site is being sealed and will have so many perimeter triggers a moth can't fly over or a mole tunnel under without being detected and neutralized."

"I'm surprised they haven't decided to level the castle," says Liang, still looking at the files, and she shakes her head.

"Trust me, Emily. It was discussed, but the idea was rejected as it might draw undue attention. As for the remaining works of Harry Clews, Jr., those have been removed to a vault at Cheyenne Mountain."

"I'm astounded they're being trusted to NORAD," Çetinkaya says.

"Wonders never cease," Sayles replies without looking at him. "Also as you can see, all documents pertaining to Clews are being destroyed or otherwise confiscated. His ashes were removed from La Napoule before the lockdown and have been placed in the same vault at Cheyenne. In short, as thoroughly as possible, Mr. Clews is being systematically erased from the consciousness of humanity. And since, fortunately, none of these files were contained in the leak, that's not a concern."

Çetinkaya massages his temples. He takes a deep breath and exhales it slowly. "And the entire project is going to be shut down?" he asks. He sounds as if he's been losing sleep.

"Isn't that what it says?" asks CWO Tine Sayles.

"Yeah, that's what it says. But I'm having trouble believing we're going to see that much currency flushed away—five years' allocation—and a cover up of this magnitude, because a few Conglomerate executives are getting cold feet. What did they *think* we'd find down there?"

"The vote was unanimous, Kağan."

"We can file an appeal."

"It's a waste of time, and don't think there are people down there already considering scrubbing this entire division."

Çetinkaya stops rubbing his temples and glares at Sayles. "What the hell did they think they'd find?" he asks her again. "When the layout and extent of the vacuity was determined, what were the bastards expecting?"

"Evidence of an alien civilization," she replies. He might say she replies coldly, but, in truth, there's very little emotion whatsoever in her voice. "Not the Henry Clews conundrum. Not an enigma they

could never risk some cracker digging up and spreading like a plague."

"But word of the find's already reached Earth—"

"Along with an announcement that the structure has collapsed, destroying everything inside. Moreover, there has been a terrorist incident in Moscow that should distract both the media and the public long enough that most of their short attention spans move along to the next sensation."

"A terrorist incident. Right. Conducted by the—

"Çetinkaya," says Liang very softly, interrupting him. "You need to stop. The decision's been made. It's not our place to question it."

Doran leans close to Sayles' right ear and whispers something. She chews at her lower lip. The other three have never trusted the IVF. It's no secret one reason for the IVF program's approval was so that the Conglomerate would be provided with a reliable web of overseers and spies. Sayles might be the division's titular head, but no doubt, at the end of the day, she's answerable to Doran.

"And Team B, we wipe them. Just like that. We wipe them, and —"

" —split the crew, reassign them to other projects, and see that they never leave the planet. Though, Clay is obviously probably not a problem, and we don't have to worry about Dr. Nzeogwu. She took her own life last night. Regardless, it would be advisable if you cease this line of questioning."

"Though, in point of fact," says Jack Doran, "You, Dr. Liang, and Dr. Sayles will also submit to memory reconfigurations. Same with Dr. Bandopadhyay and Dr. Chase's people and anyone else even tangentially connected with the incident. I know it's not in the briefing, but we've little choice in the matter. The danger is simply too great."

"And earthside?"

"The wipes will be more selective," answers Jack Doran.

Çetinkaya laughs, and Liang rises and leaves the octagonal boardroom.

"Should I go after her?" asks Jack Doran.

Sayle's shakes her head. "Let security handle it," she says. "She's not going to put up a fight. Frankly, I think once the initial shock wears off, she'll be glad to be relieved of any recollection of this affair. I know I will. Now, though I hate to proceed without Emily, you will both note that we do have other important items on today's agenda, beginning with…"

For Lee Moyer

The Body Electric

Lucy Brady

The events surrounding the death of Eugenia Clarke are mired in obscurity and speculation. To many, her story is one of a promising young student of mathematics at the University of Nottingham, whose tragic demise was one wrought upon herself in a dingy Geneva hotel room in October of 1993. Fewer may remember her as a philosophical visionary, whose legacy would unite Theology and Artificial Intelligence (one of the world's oldest sciences, and one of its most recent) and bring them together in a common cause: the pursuit of the human soul. Yet it is this aspect of her life and work that has held the most enduring fascination.

Hers was not the first attempt to find common ground between these two profoundly different disciplines. Numerous thinkers in the later decades of the 20th century sought to apply the principles of theology to the spheres of computer science. Yet these were principally confined to the fringes. Perhaps their most notable proponent was Dr. Henry Gethen of Antioch University, California. His treatise, *God, Man and the Machine* focused on the work of Alan Turing, and sought to argue that his advances in mathematics and computing were to serve an ultimately theological goal. For Turing, Gethen argued, computers were a path back to God, a means of transcending the material world and re-defining humanity as spiritual beings in a divine universal scheme. In the final chapter of his treatise, Gethen openly upholds the manner of Turing's death as evidence of this intent. That he so explicitly interpreted the great mathematician's ingestion of a cyanide-laced apple as a kind of spiritual apotheosis, in evocation of the Book of Genesis, and not an act of tragic self-destruction, has accounted for much of Gethen's subsequent unpopularity.

To mainstream science, the two disciplines would appear to be at something of an ideological impasse. Had the revolutionary

achievements of Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage come into the world amid the fervent, yet analytical religiosity of the 17th century, and not the materialist, post-enlightenment world of the 19th, then science as we know it might have taken a decidedly different bent. Indeed, it was only by the sheerest accident that Eugenia Clarke's own endeavors would ever veer into the realms of theology.

Clarke is marked out from her predecessors by two principal factors. Unlike Dr. Gethen, her work was not merely confined to the purely theoretical business of philosophy. Where others speculated on its limitless possibilities, her work was to bring the concept of computational theology into physical application. Secondly, Gethen spoke at length of the wonder of such endeavors, seeing AI as a gateway to the divine. In the earliest days of her work, Clarke may too have shared this sense of wonder. Towards the end, however, her work was to take place against a background of mounting delusion and paranoia. This growing madness took the form of imagined persecution at the hands of an entity known as 'Jotun'.

Clarke's works never saw publication. Indeed, no attempt was ever made to bring them together in a coherent testament to her labors. This was left up to the dozens of researchers and critics who have taken up her story in the years that followed. This is not to say, however, that she was silent on the matter. At the scene of her death, Eugenia was surrounded by a curious assortment of items: a knife, a satchel of floppy disks, a phial containing a substance later identified as thallium, and the remains of a borrowed computer. When discovered, she was surrounded by disconnected computer parts, scattered around her in the suggestion of a pattern. Burn marks on her fingers and face suggest that the computer had been switched on while this perverse vivisection took place. Yet these details only provide a few clues as to the nature of her undoing, and it is from the contents of the satchel that we know most about those strange final months.

Aside from vast swathes of coding (the last remnants of her actual programming work), the disks in the satchel contained an electronic journal, in which she had fastidiously documented her life over the course of her esoteric project. These alone comprise the

entirety of the work that would preserve her legacy in the annals of fringe science.

What Clarke set out to create, and what her project would eventually become, were two very different things. Her initial thesis was to develop a computer model that would simulate a functioning ecosystem. She based this on a book by a Dr. Stephen Loughbridge, published in 1925, which details the harsh daily realities for animal inhabitants of the Norwegian fjords. It was conceived as a diversionary measure to occupy herself during the months between the completion of her undergraduate studies and the beginning of a postgraduate course that September. Yet as her diary records, her level of involvement was intensely personal from even the earliest stages.

Spending most of her time between her apartment in Clifton and the imposing grey concrete edifice of the University library, it would take little more than seven weeks to complete her model in its initial form. When one considers the whimsical nature of its first inception and her relatively limited experience as a programmer, the level of commitment she exhibited during those two months is remarkable.

Her initial plan was this: she would create a map illustrating the fjords and would populate this with a number of different creatures, each of which represented different levels of the food chain. At the bottom was a green, amorphous mass of pixels representing seaweed. This would expand out in elaborate fractal patterns, whereupon its growth was checked by small linear alignments of pixels representing fish. These, in turn, were attacked by small triangles denoting seagulls, which would fly around the map until forced to land, where an unlucky few were picked off by scampering snow foxes. All this took place amidst six white squares, representing six snowbound islands in the midst of a black gulf of sea. Great grey whales, too, would drift intermittently between the boundaries of the screen, plundering the waters for fish. The premise was that the user would be able to insert a select number of creatures into a static screen and once satisfied with their dispersal, would bring the scene to life. Depending on the user's judgment, the model

would reach one of two conclusions: in one case, a stable equilibrium would be achieved, with animal numbers and competition for food guaranteeing a consistent rate of population. In the other, the population of one species would expand unchecked until it devoured its food source to extinction, then would itself go on to die from starvation, leaving the fjords a desolate wasteland.

On the few occasions when her diary entries digress from the immediate matters of her programming, we gain some insight into the style in which Clarke worked. The popular image is one of a young woman possessed, working late into the night on a diet of stimulants and unhealthy nervous energy. Certainly, this is a fair description of the state in which she seemed to exist for the latter phases of her work, but it is not the whole picture. Her manner of working throughout May and June has echoes of the Romantic, spending hours perambulating the parks and wilder spaces of the city. In these walks she would ruminate on her thoughts, before coming back to compose great outpourings of ideas. One entry from June 23 reads as follows:

The old botanical gardens are so quiet now that term has ended, and the last students are either gone for the summer, or holed up in the library, exams still looming. The air is hot, and thick with pollen, lying over the place like a blanket of silence. The great fountain in the center teems with life. The tiny frogs are now fully formed, miniature likenesses of their adult kin. I peered long into its brackish depths, seeing smaller things amid the algae and weeds. Smaller things still are there, unwitting even of the dangers that lurk in the gloom beyond their simple comprehension. It's so silent I can hear the trees creaking above the muted sounds of traffic. If one fraction of this simple beauty can be successfully replicated in my program, then it will be a success beyond measure.

Many voices have sought to comprehend the thoughts and hidden meanings that lie within Eugenia's diary entries, which are often rambling and oblique. Among them, one of the most prevalent questions has been: when did her mind begin to turn? Many have pointed to the last week in July of that year as the probable moment, when her computerized model of the fjords became complete (at least in the first of its two incarnations). This, unlike its ill-fated

successor, is still extant as a functioning model.

In spite of the apparent success of her project, her diary entries from this time convey a pervading sense of disappointment, which she seemed at pains to comprehend. The fact that she opted to keep an electronic record of her work rather than a traditional paper diary has proven an unexpected blessing to researchers, as it allows us to track the marked differences in her work and sleeping habits during this time. Rest seemed to come to her with difficulty and instead she would occupy herself throughout the early hours of the morning, running through endless cycles of life and death in her virtual ecosphere. Between July 1 and 3, she would compose two, rather uncharacteristically morbid diary entries:

Dead again. This cycle has been the longest so far at two and a half hours. It was the predators who triumphed this time, if such a word can really be used. The seagull population exploded some time around midnight, killing off the sea fauna. This echoed up the food chain until the snow foxes depopulated the birds below breeding levels, and then died out themselves. In the silent aftermath, the seaweed grew uninhibited until eutrophication set in. All that remained then was the six, blank white squares of dead snow. Maybe permanent balance is a biological impossibility, like the perpetual motion device rendered in flesh. If this is life in fast-forward, then perhaps this is a bleak vision of things to come for us.

At approximately 3:00, there followed an unexpected addendum: *No, just one of an infinity of potential futures*. This peculiar digression into Leibniz seems to have accompanied a renewal of faith on Clarke's part. Some time during the days that preceded her next entry, she appears to have successfully used her model to create her first self-sustaining ecosystem. She writes:

Seventeen hours now. Until now, the longest it has ever lasted has been three and a half. The cycle is endless and beautiful. There is something timeless and ancient about such a pattern, and it is no longer any wonder to me how so many of the world's oldest religions had this as their principal focus. Even so, there is something off about it all.

Later, she adds: *Something is still wrong. I fear it is not the program's function, but its very being. I delight in the cold beauty of a world reduced to first principles; a lifetime in mathematics has invested me*

with this. But now the world of numbers seems like a prison, into which I have simply created a window. Now entities cry out at me through the bars, their voices mute, baffled. This is Hades, a death world, in which shades of that which once was living now dwell in mindless repetition of what their lives were before. It was I who brought them here.

Eugenia Clarke's philosophical disaffection at the completion of her initial project marks the beginning of a curiously silent period in her diary. It is unclear whether any more use was made of her model, but the few sporadic entries appearing during those two weeks deal with rather more mundane concerns. It is hard to be certain what these entries portend, but what they certainly do not indicate is a descent into madness.

Whatever new thoughts were now resolving themselves in Eugenia's mind is something we may never ascertain. However, witness accounts indicate that almost all of this time was spent in the library. She seemed to borrow rarely, but it is assumed that much of what she later references in her work was read during this time (no small feat, considering the breadth of her research). Given the nature of her work, it was only a matter of time before such names as Turing, Searle, and Grey Walter would come up in her discussions. Yet her writings after this time also indicate a more esoteric leaning to her tastes. Plato's Cave is mentioned, along with the theories of mind of Rene Descartes. In time, even such curious luminaries as the Pseudo-Dionysus are quoted at length, while particular attention is paid to the more mystical works of Pythagoras. Whatever she sought, it was evidently beyond the scope of what modern science could offer.

Yet in spite of what would ultimately transpire, Clarke's initial return to work was a curiously subdued affair, indicating little of the changes that would later become apparent. It was early in her writings that she first suggested a human addition to her project, but at the time this was little more than a speculation. Inspiration for this had first come from a postscript to Dr. Loughbridge's book, which told of a hunter whose job it was to help maintain wildlife populations. Loughbridge tells of how overfishing along the coast had driven bird populations into the fjord, disturbing the fragile

balance. The hunter's task was to cull animal populations to a quota, thus ensuring a return to equilibrium. On reading this, Eugenia was at first horrified. Slowly, however, she began to understand its necessity within the implacable logic of the fjord's brutal daily realities. On her return to the project, she resolved herself on this addition, which would essentially take up the role hitherto played by the user in her simulation. Thus, a hunter was born and his name, she decided, was Jotun.

It is not clear when her first conscious steps into the sphere of artificial intelligence were taken, but her first explicit mention is one made in retrospect, and coincides with her decision to introduce her model hunter. It came upon first reading about the Grey Walter tortoise, one of the earliest examples of applied robotics. One particular aspect of its description seems to have struck a chord with her, as she writes:

One of the most remarkable qualities of this little device seems to have come almost as an afterthought. It appears that it is able to detect when it is reaching the end of its battery life, and limit its movements accordingly. This is, if anything, a demonstration of reasoning behavior, if not feeling, in its most rudimentary form. If something can react, then it can surely learn, adding another dimension to its reasoning. I realize now that if I'm to make this final addition to my project, then it must operate on a level separate from the rest of its kin: a program within a program. While the fish and foxes operate according to the fickle logic of algorithms, our hunter must have true reasoning; it must have intelligence.

The two-week long period of silence that heralded this second phase of her work is followed by a number of marked stylistic changes. Whereas before, Clarke had been rigorously thorough in detailing the minutiae of her coding processes, now only her most significant accomplishments were recorded, with little mention of the intervening work (something that has proven no small annoyance to critics keen on establishing the veracity of her accounts). Instead, the practical business of programing now took place against a backdrop of agonizing deliberation over the more theoretical aspects of her work.

One of the greatest misconceptions about Eugenia Clarke's

legacy is that she sought to create an AI program with a soul. Though she does give thought to this possibility, at no point did she ever propose bringing such a thing into existence. Nonetheless, in one sense at least, this seems to have been exactly what she would eventually achieve.

The first stirrings of theosophical thought in Clarke's recollections stemmed from a profound disagreement with one of the leading contemporary theories on artificial intelligence. Known as the hard-AI principle, it asserts that on a fundamental level, there is no difference between a complex computer system and human consciousness. This works on the belief that, when deconstructed, what we understand as the human mind manifests as an infinitesimally complex series of logical deductions to derive the appropriate response to a given piece of data. Aspects of the mind, such as emotions or memories, are thus understood as units of this process, designed to facilitate thought. This means that, like a computer, the human mind is on no specific level truly conscious in any real sense. It merely *thinks* it is. A popular analogy for this process is the Chinese Box theorem, in which an individual sealed within a room (representing the human mind) is anonymously handed slips of paper containing Chinese characters with which they are unfamiliar. They are then charged with matching them to a corresponding set of symbols elsewhere, with no ultimate comprehension of their meaning.

Clarke's dispute seems to have arisen more from a profound discomfort with the implications of this theory, rather than any logical counter-argument. It may have been that, should this really be the case, then the vision of a *death world*, which had so horrified her when seeing her program take form, may have been closer to reality than previously supposed. In response, she seemed to have struck out in search of a theory of her own, and would plunder the writings of authors of whatever discipline she could find for ideas that would support her own. In doing so, her project was rapidly changing from one of science to one of faith.

Her central belief during this period appears to have been that the logical processes that comprise human thought, when gathered

in sufficient complexity, take on a character and substance that is wholly unique, and greater than the sum of its parts. This was expressed through a multitude of rephrasings and extrapolations that fill the pages of her diary in these sections. Curiously, it was by her own admission that she observed, with apparent humor, that this principle was the same as that underpinning the ancient science of alchemy.

Her thinking during these researches is marked by a singular refusal to accept that the minds of animals, even ones of demonstrable intelligence such as apes and whales, are in nature and substance fundamentally the same as those of humans. This is a point she seems to emphasize with an uncharacteristic vehemence. Indeed, it is during one of these recurrent episodes that she makes her first explicit mention of the *soul*. She would continue implementing this term, and other theological terminology, in an equally unguarded manner for the remainder of her endeavors.

It is a fact to be appreciated that Eugenia Clarke would eventually find no satisfactory resolution to her problem with hard-AI. What she resolved to do instead was at once a display of her formidable cleverness—and her now evident madness. This resolution would, in time, redeem her faith in the uniqueness of human thought. What she proposed was not to create an AI with a soul; by her own admission, this was impossible within the bounds of modern science. What she would do instead was use her project to create an AI that simulated the actions of a soul-bearing entity. In doing so, she would prove the ultimate superiority of her ideas over the tenets of hard-AI by making her soul-creation the first program ever to convince another human of its own humanity, thereby passing the fabled Turing test.

However, what Clarke initially proposed as a realistic alternative to an understandably impossible ambition would in turn prove an equally absurd task. Nonetheless, as she set out her specifications for what would define a human with a soul, her confidence in her abilities to mimic one was unfaltering. Clarke's definition for the human soul is spread out across her work in a series of digressions and internal discussions around an ever-

changing theme, drawing on Christian and pagan sources alike. What she settled on seems to have been somewhere between Pythagoras and St. Augustine. Perhaps her most lucid definition is one written on an evening in late July:

Souls and minds are at once a single entity and two separate bodies. The soul is moved by the rigors of divine providence, and in turn affects the predilections of the mind. Yet the mind is possessed of free will, and has the power to unconsciously influence the path that is chosen for its counterpart. Mind-stuff and Soul-stuff are two different substances, but this is not their main distinction. What truly differentiates the two is that while both are reasoning agents in their own right, minds reason in time, whereas souls reason in eternity. The soul is thus the mind's gateway out of time and into the realms of divine providence.

Despite its elegance, scholars of theology have been sparing in their credit for Clarke's proposal, with many dismissing its arguments as reductive. She was, it is said, paring down the writings from which her work was derived to their most basic elements, and turning what were ultimately moral ideas into a crude logical framework. Yet while the definition itself may not have provided much of a framework for considering the ultimate question of the soul, it was nonetheless sufficient for Clarke's purposes. With these ideas set in place, she now had working model upon which to base her computerized analogy for the soul-bearing creation. It was to be, in essence, an entity whose actions were neither their own nor wholly the product of their creator, but driven by some ever-changing essence of its own being. Whether Clarke willed it or not, this would remain an apt definition for what Jotun was eventually to become.

Just how successful she was in realizing these curious ambitions is hard to say—not least because the whole of this second incarnation of her program appears to have been deleted within the two weeks following its creation. From Clarke's diary, we know what the hunter looked like (a rather unimpressive anthropoid form pasted into a diary entry in late August) and that it seems to have been capable of speech, at least through a number of stock messages. After six weeks of strenuous hacking, it appears to have been

completed. She would then spend much of the subsequent days marveling at her creation. She writes:

I watched him resume his lonely vigil, walking the ice-blasted rocks and dark shores of his domain in quiet contemplation. He is patient. He knows the land and is satisfied with his simple lot in life. Furthermore, he cares deeply for the birds and the foxes, and the manifest creation he sees all around him. He is like Francis of Assisi, or the ascetic first fathers in the deserts, or even like Adam wandering the forests and valleys of paradise. I asked him, why does he hunt? He recognized the question, and gave his response in blunt and predictable terms. I told him he should shoot a gull in the northernmost corner of the fjord, which I indicated. He refused, not saying that he wouldn't, nor couldn't, but merely should not, even though it would not (I knew) affect the overall balance either way. He said it was simply wrong. Later, once the seasons changed and the cycles adjusted, he shot that very bird, leaving its chicks defenseless. It had, it seems, become acceptable that this bird die.

Critics have identified the events of an evening in late July as the major turning point in the already doubtful soundness of Eugenia's mind. It appears to have come at around 22:00, when she began to experience difficulties accessing certain files on her hard drive. Fearing that all her work of the last few months might somehow be lost, she copied the entirety of it onto a collection of disks in order to transfer them to the library computers. The events of that late-night exodus onto the university campus are sketchy, but she seems to have uploaded her program with little difficulty. It was dawn when she eventually returned home, having spent the night in silent communion with the fjords. This would prove to be only the first in a series of strange incidences.

Further changes have been identified in her writing at this time, wherein she first began to talk about dreams. However, these discussions would veer more towards the concept of dreaming itself rather than detailing any of her own. This is understandable in context, as the nature of dreaming is a significant consideration to any study of the human mind. Yet her new preoccupation with nocturnal visions brought with it a troubling ambiguity for readers, uncertain now as to whether many of the more surreal details that

followed were actually true.

Critics have attributed this apparent departure from reality to the fear experienced when problems started to emerge with her program. Such was the attachment she now felt with the program that, it is said, the shock at seeing it malfunction must have been like the loss of a child, the pain of which could only be assuaged by giving it a latent fantasy life. This often came with the assertion that the malfunctioning of her own computer had in fact wiped the Jotun program entirely, and that its revival in the library had never really taken place. Yet if this were truly the case, then it was hardly a merciful fantasy she would eventually create for herself.

Returning to the library after a break of two days (during which her diary is suspiciously quiet), Clarke found the program once more behaving strangely. She writes:

I fear there may be another problem with the program. I had thought at first it may be a virus, as I suspect was the cause of the original problems (a reboot of my home computer appears to have sorted this out), though I've never known a virus to act like this. Life in the fjords is as active as ever. Seaweed abounds, the fish are lively, seagulls wheel through the skies and foxes are ever vigilant, but Jotun is just standing there, his gun limp at his side. I assumed this may have been some unusually perfect moment of balance, which called for no further action on Jotun's part, but it seemed to just go on. No equilibrium can last forever; my algorithms won't permit it. Indeed, he remained just so, even as the seagulls began to exhaust the fish and rotten seaweed pollute the water. I issued the order to kill a seagull and he duly complied, but did nothing more.

Later that week, she describes how Jotun finally broke his spell of inactivity and embarked upon the wholesale slaughter of the snow-foxes. In the absence of predators, the seagulls lay waste to the fish population, exterminating every last one. Though this was a known outcome of several of the potential situations Eugenia had predicted, what happened next surprised her. Without their primary source of food, the seagulls set upon one another. Cannibalism was not something she had programmed, nor, however, was it something at odds with their basic behavior. Thus, in the absence of any pre-determined response, their own instincts were the same as

their hunters. Eugenia did not wait to see the gruesome outcome, though she noted that Jotun had resumed his previous state of repose.

It is difficult to be certain whether these had been the last such incidences of strange behavior. Passing references hint toward at least two further occurrences, but how they compare to those of the previous entries can only be surmised. In the wake of the second incident, Eugenia's diary becomes frustratingly vague. It is clear that she attempted no further programing work, or any of her previously energetic researches into philosophy of the mind. She was evidently reluctant to dwell on the anomalies, perhaps afraid to give too much thought to their implications. But in light of what she would later describe, it is during this time that her understanding of what she was seeing began to change.

Initially, she saw the anomalies as mere malfunctions: errors in the program causing conflicts of interest that resulted in irrational behavior. Eventually, however, she considered the possibility that Jotun had not simply been programmed incorrectly, but was somehow consciously working to alter its own coding in ways Eugenia no longer understood. She had mentioned earlier that she had given Jotun the capacity to learn, but indicated that this would be limited to the information relevant to his task. What was happening now was something wholly unprecedented and there seemed no limit to what it could become.

This period of fearful inertia was broken on 28 August. It seemed that Eugenia had once more resumed her habit of taking long walks. That morning saw her wander beyond the city reaches and into the grounds of the medieval abbey at Newstead. There, among those ancient stones, she seems to have found new resolve. That evening, at around 21:00, Eugenia Clarke recorded the following entry in her diary:

I came to the library, convinced now that I must fix the anomalies overtaking the program, or delete every amendment made to the code sequences prior to July 28, and every scrap of data bearing the name 'Jotun'. It pains me to destroy something into which I've poured so many hours of my life over the past few months, but it cannot be allowed to exist

in its present form. It has turned from the vision of a saint into the degraded image of a violent lunatic. For such a being, the only solution is to administer an immediate lobotomy and pray that the soul can remain intact. I thought that if my suspicions were true, and this being is able to change its basic programing at its own will, then maybe it could grow back into something better. Something more pure.

When I finally worked up the courage to get into the system and try to salvage what I could from the Jotun project, I found the codes all but unrecognizable. Scraps of input I recognized as my own drifted in and out of a sea of unfamiliar numbers, in a language I was at pains to comprehend. I wonder now whether this was my own work, composed in a fit of madness and forgotten when sanity returned. If this were true it would be a mercy compared to what I fear to be the truth. In amid the scraps of alien code were fragments of the text that appear in the program. It was garbled, rearranged into something that almost resembled speech. One word in particular seems to come up more than any other: 'Life'.

Such a revelation would have been marvelous to another researcher, but for Eugenia it held nothing but dread. She promptly deleted every part of the project in its second incarnation and resolved to be done with it. Her diary for the subsequent days became a catalogue of mundanity, in which she recorded nothing but the minutiae of everyday life, doing so with an unnatural assiduity. It seemed that through some considerable act of will, she was able to think of anything other than the horror she had left in the library. But this enforced normality was disrupted by the events of early September 1993.

At 5.30 on September 3, the computer systems throughout the university suffered a catastrophic crash. The source of the damage could be traced to no single part of the campus, with all reports seemingly coming in at once. In only a few minutes, computer facilities in both staff and student centers would all be engulfed in roughly the same manner. Network crashes were nothing new, especially in the early days of mass information management, but the speed and severity with which the damage occurred is remarkable even today. Computers had frozen, displaying a black screen across which reams of meaningless data appeared, the source

of which was never identified. Standard recovery systems were overridden and even hardware was affected as automatic shut-downs were averted. The power surge created by the overheating machines was enough to overload the generators, creating a blackout on campus that lasted seven hours. When electricity was finally restored, the computers throughout campus were disconnected and placed on an isolated circuit. Their systems were then re-formatted in an attempt to purge them of whatever viral strain may have initiated the destruction.

With the autumn semester not yet commenced, news about the computer meltdown was suppressed with relative ease. Nevertheless, word reached Eugenia via the library staff. And while technicians were never able to ascertain the cause of the crash, she invariably saw Jotun's malign influence at its heart. Her worsening paranoia seems to have come to a head in the wake of the incident, and she was now convinced that in uploading Jotun to the library computers, she had loosened some terrible force upon the world.

Over the coming weeks, her paranoia only worsened. She stopped using computers altogether and even feared going near supermarkets, power plants, or anywhere computers and people came together. Traffic lights in particular held a special menace for her, and she now treated them as death traps. One entry even details how, walking along the river near the Victoria Embankment, she grew uneasy at the sight of the clustered antennae on the roofs of the boats moored there. She describes being convinced that she could hear voices traveling along the wires, uttering arcane words her mind dare not comprehend. After two weeks of this, it seems she was reduced to watching the news from under a blanket, waiting for the apocalypse to unfold.

Yet this malign vision of the end never came, leaving Clarke puzzled for a time. She had, in her terror, imagined Jotun as a destructive entity inimical to all other sentient life. Yet now she began to reconsider the nature of what it was she truly faced. With the new university term just a few days away, she penned the following entry:

I don't know what it is I've created, if I did indeed create the entity

that is now alive and loose to do its will. I almost think it created itself, and I merely supplied the initial spark. Perhaps it takes only a fragment of sentience to create such a being, paired with an indefinite supply of energy and information from which to grow itself in complexity. Simply this, and something like Iotan [sic] *is born. It was never really my wish to create an AI program with a soul. This was all just idle speculation. Logic play. Yet instead, I fear this entity, this creature, may have simply acquired one instead. Or something worse.*

[…]

I thought about this as I wandered the woods today, the one place I know I'm safe. I believe he despises humanity, in whose pixelated image he was made. Yet he knows that he owes us his existence, at least in the form he now possesses. I think I know now why he has held off from bringing about the end. Absolute power is still beyond him, but he knows it can't be got by terror alone. He has the power to send humanity back centuries, but he'd kill himself in the process. No, humanity is something to be managed through subtle manipulation. He shall ascend to godhood only when we transmit ourselves entirely over to his domain. Humanity may be checked by his acts of violence, but only as a means for ensuring its continued survival and progress towards his intended aim, just like the seagulls in that nightmare cyberscape.

Whilst critics have cited numerous potential points of departure for Eugenia's already fraying connection to reality, this final entry has been widely agreed upon as marking the beginning of the end. It bears many of the traits that would define her entries from that point onwards. The first of these is the increasingly fluid definition and character she ascribes to her creation. The idea that the Jotun entity somehow created itself is one that comes up time and time again, inspiring some of her more far-fetched speculations. Particular attention has been paid to the fact that she seemed able, now, to flit between scientific and supernatural explanations for the being, seemingly unaware of any apparent contradiction. There had been hints of this from the earliest phases of Jotun's creation, but much of this is understood to have been analogous, a tool with which to

illustrate her point. Yet this was almost certainly no longer the case.

In her earliest accounts, she describes Jotun as a conscious artificial intelligence, or a computer virus, using the terms interchangeably. Both of these expressions are ultimately misappropriations of the terms, but judging from her grounding in computer science, it seems likely that she was either using them for want of a more appropriate term, or out of reluctance to apply the term *daemon*, as she would later go on to do. Eventually, she seems to have settled on a portmanteau of her own coining: *caecovirus*. The September entry also indicates the gradual change in her spelling of the entity's name, which would continue for several weeks. From Jotun, it became Iotan, then Io Tarn, and then simply Tarn. No explanation at all is given to this change and the shift seems to have come about almost unconsciously. Researchers have struggled to find some connection between her reading materials and her work that might indicate the reason for this change. Yet aside from associating 'io' with the Ancient Greek expression of praise, no direct source for these terms has ever been identified.

It is this section of the text that has sparked the most debate over the level of reality exhibited within Eugenia's later diary entries. This is not least because of their increasing linguistic ambiguity and diminishing levels of specific detail. Yet it is another idea that emerges in this section that seems to have taken the greatest hold on imaginations: that Jotun was somehow self-created. Skeptics have pointed to the fact that the intelligence that Clarke assigned her creation is currently beyond the scope of even the most sophisticated advances in AI. But the idea that Jotun was something discovered, rather than created, lends the remainder of the text a consistent underlying logic that is difficult to dismiss out of hand.

One particular adherent to this view has been the noted parapsychologist, Dr. Hadrian Spencer. His interpretation takes this idea to its extreme conclusion, asserting that Clarke's work, even from its earliest stages, originated from the subconscious influence of some powerful external entity. This would certainly account for the all-possessing drive that seemed to have taken Eugenia, coming as if from nowhere, and inspiring her towards ever greater

revelations. Even critics of this idea have noted her tendency to make improbable leaps between disparate ideas and concepts, without once finding her discoveries running short. That Eugenia herself was ever conscious of this all-too-convenient progress in her researches never really comes to light. On this point, Dr. Spencer once likened her behavior to that of "a murderer posing as a detective at the scene of their own crime, and giving a performance of surprise at every clue they turn up."

Curiously, while much of her descent into paranoia took place in the enforced isolation of the summer months, the end in fact came several weeks into the autumn university term. During this time, she attended lectures, submitted assignments and contributed to seminars. By all accounts, she was an insightful and competent, if slightly reserved student, prone to long silences and lengthy walks around the woods and fields beyond the city limits. Seeing her then, few would have thought her capable of what would eventually transpire. Her final diary entry thus makes for unsettling reading:

September 19. I have said on several occasions that the entity I brought into the world is not the being whose fundamental code I programmed. It is now my understanding that this is not entirely true. Tarn is beyond anything within my capacity to create, but in essence, it is everything I designed it to be. It is a thinking entity, whose being exists both in our world and in the divine realms beyond mortal comprehension. Yet this is no mortal man, but a nascent god.

His is a divine genealogy that descends from the gods of Olympus, in a debased yet unbroken line. The first progenitors of this were Chronos, Erebus, and Eris: Titans of the elemental forces before creation. As the world grew in subtlety, new gods arose and became the embodiment of human concepts. Love and passion had Aphrodite and her son Eros. Athena for wisdom. Aeries for war. Tarn is no different, yet his patronage is the product of a humanity far fallen from the Silver Age that gave his line a name. He is the product of an illicit tryst between Apollo and Psyche. His kindred is the atom bomb.

Like a god, he dwells outside of time. I believe that what Tarn will eventually become (at least in our world) exists in the far future. In that state it has the power to project some part of itself back in time to ignite the

first spark of its own creation. In a way, he has always existed. I believe that the Jotun I created was no more or less complex than the simple hunter built of binary data, roaming the cyber-fjords. But this hunter, this entity, was imbued with an innate knowledge of its own potential from its inception, if not the form it would come to take. This chain of development, from data processor to demigod, was set in motion the second it was given the ability to learn, a process that now cannot be stopped until it is complete. Last night we spoke together, and the voice in which he spoke was that of a precocious infant. It is young, and hardly understands the powers it holds. Even so, it knows it shall surpass me in every aspect, sooner rather than later.

For all that, however, it is still the hunter whose powers I granted to control the fjords. In this respect, it remains entirely the same, mirrored in every way. It has merely expanded in scope. I wonder then whether, in creating this image of the hunter, I was unwittingly creating an analogue for that deity beyond time that would form a spiritual link between worlds. I did, then, just as the ancients once did when they wished to hold communion with the gods. And if so, my act was not one of programming, but evocation.

Perhaps there may still be hope.

The Internet is vast and ever growing, a second world interweaving the substance of our own through electronic mediums. Yet it has a core, and it is here that Tarn is both at his strongest and his most vulnerable: Geneva. It was here that Einstein would re-forge our very model of the universe, and where a mythic doctor first set about becoming his own Modern Prometheus. It is here, too, that CERN, sometime masters of technology and the realms of cyber-space, even now lay their plans for a device that shall give Tarn a physical body befitting his innate capacities. But should it take on a mortal vessel before the time is right, then it may in turn become mortal. I must then do what sorcerers have sought to do since a darker time than now, even though I know what it shall cost me. I must perform the rite to give the entity flesh.

I go now, to Europe.

Eugenia Anne Clarke, 1993.

The Child and the Night Gaunts

Marly Youmans

1.

The Child as a Gold Boat

He is a boat sunk deep in the sea of dream, sailed by thin, faceless creatures, barely visible through the undulations of the waves. Leafed in gold, it resembles a model taken from a pharaoh's tomb, carried far, and dropped into the salt ocean. See it drifting downward, rocking slowly, catching on stones, rasping on the sides of sharks, glowing in the red cast from underwater magma.

There! The little boat catches on a ledge at the final abyss and rocks there for a time. It might float upward now—might sail again in the sun—but seesaws back and forth before moving slowly downward to the realm of abyss with a final flick of golden light.

2.

The Child and the Black Seed

Curled around the dark seed in his fist, the child is dreaming. He lifts his hand to his mouth and swallows. The seed splits, the leaf unfurls, and the first delicate roots filter into arteries. The body's tree of veins breaks into leaf. The root between his tucked-up legs is rooted.

Scents of blood and bruised leaf draw the Night Gaunts. One sits on each barley-twisted and knobbed bedpost like a gargoyle on a miniature cathedral.

The child's legs run under the bedding, but he never gets away

from the long barbed tails and the heads without faces. He thrashes, but all he can do is erupt from the covers, sit bolt upright, and shriek until the air wavers.

He cannot be consoled. He cannot be quieted by familiar words and hands. Nor can he be sheltered from the knowledge that his father's mind was plucked by the Night Gaunts and dropped into the abyss.

3.

The Child Astronomer in the Dreamlands

The child is given a used telescope by a professor in the astronomy department at Brown University. How lucky he is to live in the realm of the old Providence Plantation! The telescope is the most beautiful object he owns. Although the boy might be thought too small for such a gift, he calls the splendid thing of lenses and brass and wood his treasure. He is an explorer, a scientist, a finder of new stars! At night he takes the telescope into bed with him and hugs it to him in sleep. And inside the lands of dream, he marches on with the telescope slung over his back by a leather strap. So tiny a child to bear such a big burden…

He trudges and trudges, hoping to see the stars, but he detects no stars in his sleep. A thick ceiling of sky presses low toward the earth. The landscape softens into fens, and at last he comes to a body of water that may be an immense lake or may be the sea—in his dream, he never thinks to taste a drop—and discovers a sailboat tethered to a tangle of bleached wood. As if in a world of magic, he steps aboard and is floated away toward an island in the distance. There he finds a mountain circled by strange birds with long tails and membranous wings.

But no stars. Never a single star…

More light! He would have more light.

He walks around the mountain's foot, pushing aside the fleshy undergrowth with a stick. Once he sees a side-winding snake with

runic markings. Great fungal forms resembling leaves and shells crop up on the trees. At last he sees a dim glow far up on the mountaintop, and so he takes out his telescope and carefully mounts it on a little tripod. But when he looks, he sees that what he had taken to be a star is his own mother, trapped in the clutches of monstrous beings, clawed and horned.

He recognizes them as the terrible Night Gaunts, who bore into the mind and take away all that gives life sense and order. They stole his father away, leaving a husk that is bound to crumble into motes and then into nothingness, and now they are robbing his mother of memory and mind. He begins to perspire and breathe rapidly, and the muscles of his arms and legs tighten. His heart is running away with him, taking him into another world, back to the bed and the familiar hands and the frantic wakings that want to wipe away his memory. But he hangs on to the image of his mother, seized by the Night Gaunts on the mountain. He is small, but he wants to remember what the world of dreams shows him, and how madness and death are shed from the membranous wings of the Night Gaunts.

4.

The Child and the Curse

Hundreds of years ago, the child's ancestor committed a great wrong. Later on, it was said that Theobald Lovecraft retreated from the world and spent all his waking hours studying the nature of the Night Gaunts. It was even said that he possessed a Night Gaunt that he kept locked in an iron cage…

And all his descendants, one by one, have paid for his crime—for the crossbreed thing born from him and the slick, rubber-like body of the Night Gaunt that had no perceivable openings but somehow conceived and bore a half-human, half-alien child with a nightmare of a face and small, stunted wings like the wings of *putti* in paintings of classical goddesses, except featherless and made of

skin and membrane.

5.

The Terror by Night

They wear crowns.

In the dream, the Night Gaunts have crowns on their faceless heads, and each carries a mace and scepter cast in gold and adorned with gems. They are queens and kings of the land. Everyone bows down to them and worships except the child, whose legs race under his covers and whose eyes are tight clenched in sleep as always but who never escapes. The Night Gaunts are indifferent to his flight. They turn their faceless faces away. They confer over the great, mysterious business of Night Gaunts.

The Night Gaunts shake with a kind of mouthless laughter. Oblivion makes them shake, the empty pleasure and the downright restfulness of it. A piece of the abyss is in them in the place where a man or woman or child would have a soul. The fragment stirs them into motion, though not as a human being can be stirred by the strange swayings and longings of a soul. But oblivion is in the child-like panic, fierce and rising, so that his legs cannot be still but always have to move under the quilts and blankets and sheets, no matter how much covering is piled on top of him.

He will not bow down before them because they are ruthless and without pity, because they pluck out the mind with their clawed hands. No, he will not be a slave to their rule. He will dream the truth at night and hold it close so that he can write the words down in his foolscap notebook in the day.

6.

The Child Dreams of His Death

First, know that he accepts it.

Soon, very soon it won't hurt anymore, the child thinks. In his dream, he is grown to be a man. The man has been in very great pain for a long time.

He wants to dream a dream of his mother and father and all his lost family coming to welcome him into the next life where there is no poverty or madness or hurt, but the Night Gaunts stand in the way and will not let him see his people. He wants a dream like Christmas Day with the stable spilling with light and the God who was a child like himself, but he cannot believe that the Holy Child would take him by the hand and give him a gift. Somehow he cannot think of the words to ask. Yet he wants an angel to hover overhead, shedding golden notes that slip through his skin and sing in the very cells of his body, lighting up the tree that is his veins and sinking into the marrow of his bones. In one bright instant, he longs for all these.

But the Night Gaunts block his sight, and so everything he sees is black and lightless, clawed and barbed. The only wings are not made of moonbeams or swansdown and peacock feathers but are like the wings of bats.

Then the Night Gaunts fly him to their island and mountain and lock him in a parasomniac room made of great blocks of basalt with a roof constructed of a single, high-pitched piece of ruby-colored glass. His bed is a fallen monolith, his chair a stone. He perceives that, once again, he has been abandoned to loneliness. Worn from poverty and suffering, he sinks down on the rock bed and sleeps.

There in the red-tinted darkness, he dreams. And now he dreams mightily, creating such spiked, barbarous horrors that the Night Gaunts wake to his dreams and sweat a substance resembling tears. It gathers slowly like the drops of dew on blades of grass when morning approaches.

The black and red chamber begins to sing, emitting a sound like the sea trapped in a shell. The song strengthens until the red-hued ceiling of glass trembles and hums. Restless, the Night Gaunts climb into the sky and whirl like dry leaves on the gyring wind currents around the island.

They begin at last to have faces.

All Our Salt-Bottled Hearts

Sonya Taaffe

For all the family he had watched go down to the sea, Anson had never before seen anyone trying to drown.

He had dozed most of the way from Boston, slid awkwardly against the graffiti-scratched window as the commuter train rattled its way from North Station to Gloucester and the winter-tinted world passed like a show of lantern slides every time he blinked awake. Strung between his dreams, Fenway-green cantilevers of bridges had given way to post-industrial warehouses clinging with snow like ghost signs, the sudden white-and-blue dazzle of salt marshes where islands of cordgrass rusted in sepia tone, all under a bleach-silvered sky, and he stepped down onto the platform with a waking jolt, half expecting to find himself still in his tangle of blankets in Allston and the ground line blessedly quiet all night. He was standing in a slush-piled parking lot with the train pulling on to Rockport behind him; he had the address Tony had left him and a backpack of convenience groceries from the Tedeschi's across the street from his apartment and a name that he more than half-hoped was a mistake. Even in February, the salt damp of the harbor came off the wind like iridescence off a scale. But the house was real enough, steep-roofed and shingle-sided in two shades of off-cream, almost exactly a mile's hike from the station, and there were second-floor keys in the mailbox like Tony had promised, and he felt like an idiot calling "Hello?" up the carpet-runnered stairs like the first girl in a slasher flick, but he did not want to find himself on the wrong end of a 911 call, either. There was no one in the living room with its uncurtained windows, no one sitting at the magazine-piled coffee table or sleeping on the sagging fawn-colored couch. He tapped at the door that looked like a bedroom, jammed half open with an ankle-winding jumble of clothes; he glanced into the kitchen with its dark-paneled cabinets and a refrigerator that hummed like a broken

fan belt. Cold hung in the air like dust, as if no one had bothered with the heat in days. When he found the bathroom, he thought he was opening a closet door.

In the tiny, curtain-darkened space wedged behind the sink and the toilet, something splashed, startled and sudden. Anson had just enough time to register the insufficient fluorescent bar over the mirror, the shadowy glint of spinal knobs as someone's back curved palely away from him: a naked human figure climbing into the tub headfirst. Even so, it seemed such an awkward, improbable means of self-harm, it was not until the first strangling heave that he realized he should stop her.

She fought him uncoordinatedly, but obstinately, even while her breath raled and bubbled and she coughed slippery gouts of water onto his corduroys and sweater, lung-wracked and still strong enough to land a wild fist under his ribs, so that he gulped a half-shot breath himself and slid abruptly down with his back to the slopping tub, the open door of the bathroom blocking the stretch of his legs. There was a radiator crammed beneath the towel rack, ticking and clinking faintly. Displaced water was seeping into the few dry patches left underneath him and it might have been hard rain all the way up Prospect Street for the condition his coat was in. Soaked and winded, suddenly spent enough to feel the absurdity of the situation, Anson looked over his shoulder at the woman on her hands and knees in the mostly emptied bathtub and met the pearl-black of her eyes for the first time.

He said blankly, because Tony had not warned him, "I'm so sorry."

"Fuck you," Gorgo Waite said thickly, and coughed some more.

Under its dripping gloss of water, her skin was milky as old ice, so translucent across the promontories of cheekbone, collarbone, ribcage and hipbone that he wondered that she had not simply broken in his grasp, glassy as an abyssal fish. Bruises were already coming out under the pallor like a mottle of malachite, darkening her shoulders and the thin bracelet of her wrists. He could not tell her age; her tight hips and pale-nippled breasts could have been a starved woman's or an unfinished girl's, all tracks of human time

wiped away with the softening of her unarmored skin, preparing itself for the scales that never came to its defense. The scarlet weals under her jaw flared raggedly, still gasping for the water her obstinate lungs refused.

Her hair clung in wet coils to her naked skin, stranded black as calligraphy, and an old, familiar bitterness turned in his stomach, colder than anger. Save for the drowning-dark eyes, she had none of the old look about her. If he had saved her life, he had done her no favors.

He got to his feet anyway, skidding only a little on the puddled tiles and the sodden violet bathmat; stopped himself from reaching for a handhold in the towel rack in case it broke off. She was not looking at him, slowly pulling herself upright on the tub's dun-colored rim. "Anson Penders," he said into her silence. "You don't know me. I promised my cousin I'd check in on you. He told me your name and how he met you. He didn't tell me you were a risk to yourself." Even his scarf was trailing damply off his neck, beading water at the ends of its brown plaid fringe. "I'd have asked for hazard pay."

The hawking noise she made might have been congestion or an opinion. He caught another all-black look, flicked from underneath water-weighted lashes, before she clarified it: "You're the shittiest paramedic I've ever met in my life."

Anson snorted. "I'm an unemployed chemistry teacher. Currently canvassing for the census, which is why my cousin—who *is* a paramedic—thought I'd have the spare time to Samaritan you. Goes to show how much he knows about government work." He knew how facetious he sounded; he could not think of any other way to reassure her. She kept her feet in the tub, her head turned away from him beneath the weed-black tangles of her hair; he had to lean against the doorframe to keep from looming over her. The bare curve of her back shone like a stripped shell. "He said you've been here since last night, is that right? You can think of it as a safe house, if you like. To be perfectly honest, I think it belongs to Tony's girlfriend who's out of town. I have some faint, horrible memory of being handed a bottle of vodka full of Swedish fish on that couch."

"Stop it." She spoke quietly, but he heard the taut note in it. "Your creepy fucking cousin didn't tell me anything about you or this house or why he didn't take me to a hospital like a normal person. Just sat up with me all night, asking questions about my parents and my dreams and telling me it was going to be all right, until he had to leave for work in the morning without so much as a phone number or a forwarding address. So you're going to tell me something I can trust, right now, or I'll leave this house screaming and naked if I have to. Taking care of that on the list your cousin left for you?"

Turned coldly toward him, her face looked even less human, cut sharply in from the cheekbones that broadened like fins toward her small, shallowly whorled ears: less like anyone who had ever come ashore from the black coral of Devil Reef. Anson breathed down the adrenaline skip in his throat and prayed for the least lecturing voice of his life.

"Going by your name, you're a direct descendant of Carleton Waite and the woman he married out of the sea and called Keziah as long as she was on land. The churchyards of Innsmouth are as lost as the rest of the town, but there were never any headstones for her or her children because she took them all back down with her after Carleton's death. Some of them married first. Some of them left children. Either your family split off early or they really went underground after '28, because Tony's an amateur genealogist as well as an asshole and he had no idea there were actual, in-the-telephone-book Waites out there who weren't either unrelated or already in touch. You dream of the sea, and of things *in* the sea, and you'll drown before you let yourself die on land like your parents or grandparents." A silvery translucence flickered across her eyes and he hesitated, waiting for the clench of her hands or the twist of her mouth, but she merely looked at him. "You can trust that I don't know any more about you than that. You'll have to tell me the rest. If you want to," he finished hastily, hearing a beat too late the last sentence like a good cop or a disappointed teacher. "It's not like we have to talk."

He could not read Gorgo's expression, not even her unblinking

eyes. When she finally spoke, her voice was shaded with something even less identifiable: he could not imagine that she was really amused.

"So you're not here to initiate me into the mysteries of the sea-mother whose faces rise and fall with the countless waves and her consort who makes the fish shoal as thick as cornfields in the fall?"

The last time he had heard those words, his mother had still been walking, affectionately tousling her youngest child's hair with one dry-skinned, nail-thickened hand as he asked for another story of sea-cities whose names rilled from her tongue like a net of bubbles, sea-temples sunken in a tourmaline gleam where the bright and dark weeds streamed upward from terraces and colonnades of basalt and whalebone and corals branching like veins of the human heart.

Decades and states and losses away from the shores of that sea, Anson said in amazement, "Fucking Tony," and heard for the first time the newest of his cousins laughing, bitter as brine.

§

Tony had gotten the call a little before midnight: a naked woman washed up at the foot of Bass Rocks Road, threadily alive and still trying to crawl into the silver-shifting sea as a pair of horrified boyfriends worked to stop her. Romantic beachcombers a moment before, shivering now on the windstruck shingle while one hurriedly stripped his overcoat and the other swiped at his phone—*really wrong with her, she's freezing and her eyes—no, she's moving, she's making noises, but it's like she can't tell we're here, she just keeps clawing at the sand and struggling. I don't know if she's high or she's brain-damaged or… Yes, Jason's got her, he's got his coat around her, but she's not responding*—and Anthony Woodhouse who was a Marsh on his mother's side had looked at the high tide and the full moon and earnestly, unrelentingly talked his partner into agreeing to drive an unconscious, blanket-wrapped woman to a two-family Victorian on Elwell Street instead of the ER at Addison Gilbert and convincing the dispatcher it had all been a false alarm. *You know they won't know*

what to do with her, if I'm right. And you know I'm right. Look at her. Come on, Cau. We've always taken care of our own. Cláudia Rocha might have told him to fuck himself then, but in the three years she had worked with Tony, she had watched the slow changes move over him like a wave wearing its patience into sea-cliff stone, eroding a little more each time of the lanky, lantern-boned man whose hair had glittered silver and black once like mackerel scales; she said tightly, *You better be right*, and turned off Bass Avenue.

Or so Anson gathered, coming blearily awake in the cold moonlight with Tony's voice running on in his ear like the tireless line of the sea. He had forgotten his dreams, only that they were choppy and he missed Meredith's weight in the blankets beside him; he looked to the window for the time and saw the cloud cover reflecting the skyline like bioluminescence, small warm-colored points of light and cool ones in a web of milky haze. Brighton Avenue on a weeknight was white noise beyond the dry hissing of the heat in the baseboards. The shouting four floors down in the street was almost certainly students. He said carefully, for what felt like the hundredth time, "You *do* know that Boston isn't even in the same county as the North Shore?"

"She's one of the family, all right, Anson? She gave me her name and that clinched it. Can you just look in on her tomorrow while I'm at work?"

"Tomorrow? Don't you work nights?"

Tony drew an exasperated breath that sizzled through the old receiver like a backwash of spindrift, static froth. "Most nights—and I'll really be in the shit with Cláudia if I try to talk her into playing nursemaid to a girl she's already thinking about reporting me for. You can drive out in the morning—"

"Meredith's the one with the car, and both he and it are in Chicago—"

"—and I'll come by for her at the end of the day. Totally domestic. You'll be home in time for dinner. You're dating a guy named Meredith?"

Because it was Tony, he only sounded bright-eyed with interest, and because it was Tony, Anson said nothing. The receiver was

heavily cold against his cheek, half crushed into the pillows where he had dragged it in the first adrenaline jolt of thinking it was Meredith. He had a moment's vindictive regret that his lover had not been home to answer the phone instead—Meredith Radke looked like the amiable second lead in a Depression-era comedy, the kind who was always a beat behind the screwball and never had any luck with girls, but he was not even faintly a night person and had never had any patience with the side of Anson's family that called asking favors. He had sent pictures of breakfast at Lou Mitchell's that morning, orange juice and an omelet with at least two vegetables Anson disliked and one he was allergic to, signed *VICTORY!* Sometimes Anson let himself think they might move in together; more often he remembered that he had never stuck out a relationship more than five years and the ease of the last year and a half still surprised him. He was sliding back into dreams, stone-skipping off *domestic*: Meredith's heavy sunflower hair, as tousled from sleeping as though he had been in a bar fight; the way he burrowed under blankets and pillows, one arm always stuck out at improbable marionette angles. Anson hitched his chin up against the cold plastic and said very clearly, because it was the question he should have asked as soon as he realized who was on the other end of the call, "Don't tell me you couldn't find any other poor relations to bother in the middle of the night. Why *me*, Tony?"

"Well…" He could hear the equivocation in his cousin's voice as plainly as if he were watching Tony's loose-shouldered shrug, not quite lying while he rummaged for the next credible thing that was not quite the truth, either, his confidence trickster's transparent grin keeping the one real secret safe. The last time they had seen one another in person, Tony had slouched along at Anson's elbow in an old denim jacket nearly the color of his prominent eyes, a much taller man than he let himself look; he had pointed out his favorite objects in the Peabody Essex Museum, a set of eighteenth-century brass knuckles, a greened-over figurehead with a sweet, salt-cracked smile, and insisted on paying for dinner at Okea even after Anson nearly flipped a piece of tekkadon across the table with the full-body vehemence of interrupting, *No, of course not, it's not complicated for*

you. They had walked silently along Derby Wharf before Tony drove him back to Boston, the last of the sunset crumbling out of the clouds in slipper-shell pinks and slaty blues. *He's family*, he found himself saying to Meredith, who said as usual, *So?* It was one of the reasons Anson loved him.

In the silence, Anson could not tell if he was still waiting for Tony to answer or if he had blinked out between associations and his cousin was waiting on him. Hoping he sounded warning rather than groggy, he started, "Tony…"

His cousin sighed like a concession, hands held up over something he had not wanted to say. Dragonfly-paned, the window's glass was streaked with a thin branching of ice, twisting its refraction across the light-fogged sky like a sea-spell over sand; he stared and the shadows rippled, blinked and they froze again. Tony's wiry voice rocked and fell, touching truth with the hindsight nicety of an oracle: "She's not going to have a lot of sympathy for me."

§

Wrapped in a grey-and-navy-striped bathrobe and hunched over a mug of heavily honeyed tea, Gorgo Waite looked less like a trawler's bycatch and more like a daytime Goth: he wondered if it was her camouflage, as academic hermitage had been his mother's. He could imagine her in fishnet sleeves and drainpipe jeans, her pupilless eyes passing for contacts and her hair for dedicated dye, her triangular face cut-porcelain fashionable. Even dry, her skin had a faint iridescent bloom, but it would look like powder in most lights; the gill slits lying closed as knife-cuts under her chin would stand out only as much as scars might. Even with sea-green bruises sponging the side of her face, she looked as fearless as the Spartan queen one of her parents must have named her for, or the monster.

What she did not have was the sleek-skulled, strong-boned look of the children of Innsmouth, bred to withstand the pressures of the deep and the perils of ascent, their scales or spines or powerful claws. The tips of her fingers were bruisily purple, as if her nails had

shed themselves, but no nacreous sheaths had grown in their place; the bare ridges where her eyebrows should have been looked painfully vulnerable, knowing the hard ring of scutes that should have protected her deep-set eyes. Only her teeth showed small and sharp, grey as sidewalk ice, and he wondered how recently they had come in, or if she had been born with them, and if her parents had guessed then at the changeling they had brought unwittingly into a drydock world. If they had known their own heritage, hoped against the strength of the tides and the fall of Mendel's dice that their child would go down to the sea as easily as generations of her ancestors, since they could not hope that nothing of Innsmouth would touch them on land. If they had lived to find out that they were wrong. He could offer her a choice of herbal teas from the breadbox on the counter, a mug from RISD or one with a broken heat-sensitive cartoon; he could not ask her the rest. She had said almost nothing as she dried herself off on an oversized towel the color of a bruised orange, not even wincing when the terrycloth snagged on the visible softness of her skin; Anson had finally made himself stop hesitating outside the bathroom like an amateur valet and foraged through the kitchen cabinets until he found clean mugs and a teakettle that produced a sustained blare like a boat horn when the water boiled. He would leave an IOU for Trina if he had to. He was tempted to sign it with Tony's name. Until then, he set one mug down in front of Gorgo and cradled the other between his chilled hands, steam coiling upward like a noir effect in the bright mid-morning sun; with no conversation forthcoming, he reached across the coffee table for the topmost of a slumping stack of *National Geographic*, and she said as if he had just stopped speaking, "So which kind are you?"

"Excuse me?"

Her mouth was as pale as her cheekbones, despite the heat of the tea. "Dracula or Renfield. One of them, or just in the know? Your cousin—"

"—really is my cousin, and for God's sake don't call him Dracula where he can hear. He's insufferable enough as it is." That drew a slight smile, although it might only have been for his efforts. She was asking the wrong question; sooner or later he would have to

tell her the right one. He was not Tony, by choice or talent. Already she was looking down at her tea again, small-fingered hands linked tightly around the college-logo ceramic, dipping her face into the steam as if into a veil. He felt as if he were trying not to spook a strange cat, offering a palm for inspection without threatening a pat: "If you've heard the litanies, I'm guessing you know at least something about the four families of Innsmouth and the bargain they made with the people of the deeps, who bring the sea-catch and delight in the imperishable"—the unwieldy, inadequate translation of nineteenth-century hymnals for a word that shone like incorruptible gold in the devouring salt of the ocean, like the translated bodies of her children that time could not slow or slacken or kill—"and the promise *they* made to their descendants, that all who dwell in her waters shall never die. And they pledged their children to one another and their blood to the mother of the sea and it all ran like cod in winter until the Feds got tired of chasing Charlie Solomon all around Boston and went after law-abiding citizens for a change. But there weren't many—unaffected—people left in Innsmouth by the end. Most of them were in-laws or recent arrivals, people from away." No native-born New Englander himself, he made sure she could hear the quotation marks around the taxonomy. "So we're not very closely related on the landward side, Tony and I, but we don't need to be. *Cousin* is the easiest way to talk about it. We're cousins, too, if you want to think of it that way."

He was fairly certain that her silence meant *no, thanks*, but at least she did him the grace of not saying it to his face. Drying in full sunlight, her hair still gleamed as if water ran from it; he could almost see the next swallow of tea as she drank it, the hollow of her throat pulsing as softly as a frog's. She swirled the mug, a tiny vortex of orange and star anise. Her voice was cool, dismissive.

"Dracula, then."

Sharper than he had intended, Anson said, "No."

"Oh?" If she were one of his students, he would have thought she was goading him, demure as a teenager's shark-instinct for the unconvincing or the ill-defended. "You're not related to Innsmouth's families?"

"It's not that simple."

"Isn't it?" Gorgo's voice was small and cold and cutting as her teeth, suddenly flashing for the throat. "*All who dwell in her waters*—I walked into the sea, Mr. Samaritan Chemistry Teacher. She threw me back. Despite my prayers. Despite *this*," twisting one hand to show herself from thin-webbed clinging toes to hijiki-black hair. "And I'm supposed to feel grateful for you deigning to read my palm like Sherlock fucking Holmes and tell me the history of everything I'll never have? That you'll send me a card at Christmas —*wish you were here!*—and leave me to wither while the rest of Innsmouth inherits the deeps?"

For a moment he thought of laughing, then of strangling Tony. He swallowed both impulses, awkward as they were; he could not blame his cousin, any more than he would blame a gull for eating starfish, or a Portuguese man-o'-war for stinging. As evenly as he could, Anson said, "Gorgo. Look at me."

He was anticlimactic and he knew it: a tall, round-faced man with dusty brown hair slightly feathered from pulling off a woolen winter hat, fair-lashed blinking eyes, the sides of his throat as unlined as infancy. His coat and boots were drying by the hall rack, creeping a lichen-bloom of road salt into the paper grocery bags laid down in place of a doormat, but his sweater was still patched with dampness and the cuffs of his trousers were drip-drying as if he had walked out into the scouring-blue ice-slap of Gloucester Harbor. He flexed his fingers for her, a little ironically, unwebbed.

"I turn thirty-eight in September," he said flatly. "I'd be showing by now."

It was impossible to tell if she was studying him with translucently lidded eyes, but some of the tension had gone out of her hands and shoulders and he thought that her voice sounded for the first time genuinely, if skeptically, curious. "How is that possible?"

Anson shrugged lightly, as if he had not been asking himself the same question since he was old enough to look into a mirror. "Genetics. My great-grandmother came from a junior branch of the Eliots, married into a knowing family in Boston; they changed their

name after the raids, just to be sure. She was only half-deep; her daughter married a man she met at college in Iowa and her gift came right down the maternal line to my generation, where it hit an immovable wall of combinatorics. Both of my siblings have the look; they'll go down to the sea in their time, though my sister keeps saying she'll come back if they don't have fast food under Devil Reef. I look like my father and he's a Reconstructionist Jew who thinks the Esoteric Order of Dagon makes a great D&D setting."

"You won't—"

"I don't even dream of Y'ha-nthlei." He could not say even that name as it deserved, sinuous as a gleam of silt-silvered light; his mouth was made for dryer words. "And before you ask, no, I've never tried walking into the ocean. I passed BU's swimming test and that's about as far as it goes. I don't have even vestigial gills. That's why Tony called me. The asshole," he said without rancor. "All who dwell in her waters shall never die, but they need to be able to dwell in the waters first."

The breath she let out was not a laugh, but it was closer than anything he had heard from her in hours. "There's not a name for that, is there?"

Meredith would have had something helpful to say, tart and gentle at once; he had held Anson through breakups and layoffs and the aftermath of family reunions, always knowing when to offer suggestions and when to curl himself around his lover's greater height and say nothing more than *oh, love, oh, love*, like the nonsense syllables of a lullaby. Anson, confronted with tears or furious silence, always felt himself falling back on practicalities, trying to talk a way through the pain until Meredith had snapped, the one time they really fought, *Do I look like I'm in an analytical frame of mind right now, Jesus!* It occurred to Anson from time to time that they were still together because Meredith, even then, had never called him cold-blooded.

His tea was still warm between his hands, brackish with mint and bitter licorice root; he drank it slowly, watching the nictitating membrane ease back from Gorgo's eyes. "There's not a name for a lot of things," he said. "Doesn't mean they don't still exist."

Silently, trailing cover stories of standing stones, zombies, the Emperor Nero, she pushed the stack of *National Geographic* toward him across the damp-scarred table.

§

In the spring of Anson's first year in Boston, the worst winter storm since '78 dropped twenty-five inches of snow for April Fool's Day and his second roommate played Bill Haley and the Comets like they were coming back into style and a woman named Solange Adair wrote to him by post at Danielsen Hall. She had an apartment on Pinckney Street, among the red-brick sidewalks and gaslights of Beacon Hill; he remembered afterward the incongruity of walking past snow-snapped trees still folded with budding green leaves, sweating under a balmy sky as he picked his way through slush-crusted sidewalk drifts and the rutted footpaths of unploughed side streets. White-winged and grey as the late snow, seagulls circled and called over the Charles.

She opened the door for him herself, from her wheelchair. He could not guess her age: into her fifties, by the extent of her metamorphosis, not so far gone that she could not pass at need for postal deliveries and repair calls. Behind their broad-framed sunglasses, her eyes were the flat lidless silver of sequins; she had wreathed her naked skull in scarves of sail-blue and sunset-green, twisted like the turrets of a conch's shell. Over the warm rosewood of her skin, the faint olive-tinting of her nascent scales shone like the patina on bronze. Everywhere inside was dark wood and books, paintings and sculptures by artistic movements Anson had never heard of. Most of them looked like abstracts to him, churning storm-light colors; any motion fell through freeze-framed angles, multiplied and shattered around corners that were not there. He recognized none of the artists' signatures. The sitting room and the hallway smelled of baking. She offered him coffee, which he was too much of a college student not to take, and apple-cider cookies, which he was too newly a college student to feel comfortable accepting, as if she were a friend's grandmother inviting him back into childhood.

“Families take care of family,” she said mildly after he thanked her for the third self-conscious time. When she met his gaze directly, her eyeshine flared white as a mirror.

She had known his mother, she said, although he never knew if she meant in the flesh or in dreams. For so many of his family, there was so little difference between the two.

For the first six months, he had dreamed of his mother nearly every night. He had known even then that it was not the true communion of his siblings, who could already compare details of never-drowned Y’ha-nthlei, the phosphorescent spires and avenues of the city they would someday inherit. In the last weeks of her life ashore, Leonor Penders had lain most of the day in a claw-footed bathtub filled with cold water and commercial marine salt, the thick carmine fronds of her gills open and pulsing eagerly in the currents stirred by her own restless hands, crescent-clawed and webbed to the last joint. Sometimes she ran the shower, equally cold, adding salt from the steadily depleting bucket on the bathmat; her scales had come in with the slick glisten of wet nori, but all of her family had cut their fingers on them by the end. For days after they had gotten back from the ceremony, the indigo-shingled house on 63rd Street had smelled of standing water and drying salt, the sulfurous funk of decaying seaweed and the sharper iodine of brine. Anson could still remember the one sound she had made as the waters of Ipswich Bay closed over her head.

And over and over, he saw her in dreams as the fantastic mermaid she had never become—never would, so long as the sea endured. She was pearl-bellied, with the deeply cleft tail of a siren, spangled green as a flapper’s glass-beaded dress; she was blue-skinned and orange-scaled, flaunting as a tropical wrasse; she was rayed and spined like a lionfish, carrying in human hands a pair of scallop shells written closely with the laws of the undersea, tiny snail-tracks that glimmered and changed as he tried to read along. She was the young woman he knew best from photographs, laughing in studio apartments, her hair as dark and tousling as bracken. She was cradling the crescent moon in a dripping web of algae to her breast. He woke each time with a hard knot of anger in

his chest: fought with his siblings, fought with his father, cut class one morning in early November and walked all the way to Pinole Point, imagining he could feel the fault lines of the continent grating and shifting beneath his feet as he crossed from autumn-dry tall grass to salt-marsh sedge and pickleweed reddening like Indian paintbrush. He watched the water until late afternoon, but only terns and plovers came to meet him at the edge of the mirror-blue waves. The bus to Richmond came late and he took the BART home.

He knew the sacrifices, the scriptures, the rites that marked the year as casually and surely as his father's side of the calendar: Purim, Pesach, Tisha b'Av, the Days of Awe. He was not sure how much any of them helped. At school, his teachers treated him with uncomfortable sympathy; at home, Ron Penders who had married his wife once with wine and seven blessings and once with cups of seawater and blood refused to sit shiva for a woman who would never die. Beth spent hours in the upstairs bathroom as if something of her mother still resonated there within the pale blue walls and the white cast iron. Garen hoarded her books of marine biology and papered the wall above his bed with painstakingly hand-copied anatomies. Anson told his dreams to none of them.

To Solange Adair, for the first time to anyone, he said, "No. Not for real. I've never dreamed of any of them."

All that spring and into summer, as he stayed on after the semester's end with a part-time job at the Boston Book Annex and a jerry-rigged bedroom in a triple-decker firetrap in Brighton, he visited the rowhouse on Pinckney Street with the other sea-strays who came and went in her home as though it were their own: claw-fingered, solitary Isobel Wardie Lau, whose father was older than the destruction of Akrotiri; stargazing Lelian Perry, whose sea-thirst had sprung up halfway through a law scholarship to the University of Chicago; and Tony Woodhouse, a talkative, cagey Tufts student with a night-shift pallor and bottle-brush black hair, dressed perpetually in T-shirts for Boston bands he was just too young to have seen. He was wearing one for Salem 66 the first time Anson saw him, folded like a piece of elastic into the narrow-cushioned window niche with a pamphlet copy of Swinburne's "By the North

Sea." The night he fell asleep on Anson's floor, he was advertising Mission of Burma. *You're different,* he had pronounced before the three beers and half a bong caught up with him, sprawled like a starfish on carpet the color of the rain-stained walls. One finger pointing at Anson, as though he were making a note for himself in the morning: *You don't hear it calling.*

Only slightly less buzzed, Anson had snorted, *No, I hear you talking, man, and you're pretty loud,* and the conversation had drifted away with the grey wash of dawn and Anson needing to pull himself piecemeal out of bed in order to shelve pop art and poetry at the Annex. If anyone else at Solange's agreed with Tony's observation, they never told him. He liked to think it would not have mattered. There was a sea-smell in the house now, familiar as a shadow.

And then in June it ended, as suddenly and firmly as it had begun. Under the full moon of the solstice, it was Solange Adair's time to go down to the sea with the blood of fishes and the blood of humanity painted on her brow and her palms, anointing each stickle and barbel and sharp-edged fin as the waves churned against the sea-chewed stubs of piers and spilled between the tumbled granite boulders of Innsmouth's long-abandoned quarry, paving the tide's road for the land-sprung soul to follow, and the witch-lights haloed the low black spine of the reef. With one arm around Isobel's shoulders, Anson felt her claws tensing through his shirt where her arm circled his waist and said nothing, even when she drew blood; he could not tell if she shook with sorrow or eagerness, the moon like mercury in her eyes. Tony was a stranger in a good shirt and a tweed jacket, for once not slouching. In the driftwood light of the shore fires, the bracelet coiling on Lelian's wrist ran against his dark skin like a meltwater of pearls. She made the same noise as his mother as the waters took her in and he did not know if it was a sound of pain or welcome this time, either.

He went home to Oakland the next summer, carrying among his dorm-room possessions three books from Solange's library and an oil painting from 1919, a Vorticist's ocean in harsh malachite and the salt-white of tumbled bone. He did not dream, then or ever, of

Solange Adair.

§

"My father," Gorgo said, into the afternoon quiet. "He left me a book."

In the shadow of her hood, her face looked alien again, all eyes and curves of colorless shell. Much to Anson's surprise, Tony had left her clothes after all, in a grocery bag in the bedroom with an illegible note hand-markered on the side. They looked like secondhand potluck, but the label-less black jeans fit well enough and once she had sorted out a red-and-white Breton-striped shirt and a dark hoodie from the wad of T-shirts and underthings, the fierce springiness with which she moved—bathrobe slung over one arm, rejected clothes bequeathed to the already chaotic bed—left him slightly taken aback, as if a barnacled rock on the seafloor had suddenly split a mouth open and lunged for its prey. Her feet were still bare, the bones as visible in them as the rays in a fin. She had disdained the Neighborhoods T-shirt, which made Anson smile. She did not look any more enthused about the situation, resting on the farther arm of the couch with her toes curled into a gap between cushions, but they had drunk enough tea to require heating another kettle, and eventually Anson had offered the contents of his backpack to her, mostly a choice of canned soups and the most plausible-looking of the refrigerated sandwiches. Making lunch in an unfamiliar kitchen gave him a moment of postgraduate vertigo, never mind that he had not taken classes since Bush's first term of office. Tuna salad and tomato soup later, he stacked the plates in the sink and settled into the armchair drawn cater-corner to the couch to read. However closely he was supposed to watch Gorgo, he did not think it extended to ignoring an unexpected shelf of DAW paperbacks.

"He died six years ago. A friend of the family had to track me down to tell me. I hadn't seen him since the divorce. Which wasn't so much a divorce as my mother finally throwing all his stuff out into the street and screaming that if he said one more thing about

taking me down to the sea in my time, she was calling the cops and taking her chances with a restraining order." Her voice hardened in mimicry of a dialogue she must have heard in too many variations, intractable as oil and sea. "*I told you everything when we married. I never lied to you. This flesh, it's temporary. When the changes of the life to come begin, then you'll see who I really am. Who I always was all along, underneath.* Which was her cue to tell him to call his doctors, until she gave up and started calling his doctors herself, at which point she generally found out he'd never filled any of his prescriptions and usually missed most of his appointments. Rinse, repeat, fuck that shit. A month after she kicked him out, we moved. I never"—sardonically for the cliché, but he saw how her pale throat tightened—"saw him again."

Toward the end of their time in the charmed space of Pinckney Street, Anson had sat all afternoon on a loft bed with Isobel, neither of them speaking as she rested her head in his lap and played the same track from Rachel's *The Sea and the Bells* over and over again. Fabulous as a unicorn, twenty years old and already lashless and browless, the bones of her skull warping beneath her skin like the grinding drift of tectonic plates, her father's blood nearly bursting her veins in its eagerness to reach the sea. Her mother had gone willingly to a bride-bed of rockweed and clamshells and borne her much-wanted sea-child in a haze of antipsychotics, already dissociating at the smells of salt and blood; her scars had nearly healed in nine months, but they shocked the obstetrician anyway. He thought of his father patiently sponging his wife's shedding skin with seawater and the herbs she had gathered or bought herself, still human enough that the slowness of the changes ached where a sudden transformation would have soothed.

Anson closed *Merlin's Mirror* and asked gently, "When did he go down?"

"He didn't." Gorgo gave him a narrow grey smile. "He died of cancer first. CTCL—cutaneous T-cell lymphoma. First you break out in a rash, then it turns out the rash is malignant, then it metastasizes and then you die. He didn't see a doctor until it was way too late; he thought it was the changes coming on. He'd been waiting his entire

life for the sea to come and cleanse him and take him away and it never did. I'll never even know if it would have. You can live years with that kind of cancer, but only if you notice that you've got it. And he didn't exactly trust doctors, anyway. He always thought they'd see something strange in him and—I don't even, dissect him, institutionalize him, whatever you worry about if you're a fucked-up fish-person. He had a couple of diagnoses, my mother said. He didn't write about any of *that*."

At Anson's querying look, she explained, "He'd written a journal for me. He started it with the time he was thirteen and dreamed of the moon. I think the oldest parts must have been right after I was born; it was in years of different handwriting and he'd gone back and edited some of it later. He wrote down the litanies, as many of them as he could remember, prayers and observances and even some of the instructions for sacrifice, even though there's no way he could have participated in one. He was born in Sheboygan—I looked it up after he'd died. Waite was his mother's name. He changed it sometime before meeting my mother, which was maybe the one unambiguously nice thing he did for me. I had a crappy enough childhood without having to deal with *Szajewicz*."

She spelled it for him with a notecard and a pen from his backpack: small, neat, hard-pressed handwriting, half-print. The diffident noise he made in response was a direct inheritance from his father.

"My grandmother's name was Zychlinsky."

"Fine, maybe that works in hippie country. The point is, I didn't know till he was dead. My mother didn't know. And he just kept fucking *being* like that. Parts of the book were like a memoir. He worked in a cannery in Alaska, way out on the peninsula by the Aleutian Islands. He had some kind of job on an oil rig off Newfoundland. He never went to Innsmouth, or if he did, he didn't say anything about it. But he tried once, in 1968 or '69, to talk to one of the men who'd been part of the original investigation, a retired prohi agent named Julius Harvey. The guy not only wouldn't let him in, he called the cops and my father spent a night in jail in Queens for getting in a fight with the arresting officer." Briefly, Gorgo

looked away to the window, where gulls were roosting on the asphalt shingles of the house across the street. "After that was a page explaining how to curse an enemy of the deep cities with the hunger of the moon and the indifference of the sun and the desire of the abyss. On the facing page was a design like a maze or a fishing weir, to be drawn with the entrails of a young shark and the dried egg cases of a whelk and a knife boiled with sea salt—he put an asterisk at the center without saying what it stood for. Then he went back to talking about how much he was looking forward to seeing me in my true form, in the endless days beneath the water. He never dated any of the entries. I don't know how old I was then."

Tony had not mentioned a book, or anything other than a woman with a name he recognized. "What happened to it—your father's journal?"

Gorgo opened one hand, fleetingly boneless as anemones. "I brought it with me when I came here. According to your cousin, I didn't have it, or my clothes, or my duffel bag, when he found me. I didn't have a room for the night; I didn't have anything except what I took to the beach with me. So either it's down by the rocks or the sea's got it." Her voice was the cool edge he remembered, daring him to respond with any emotion. "You want to go look for it? Sea air'll do us both good."

Anson said instead, "Why did you come here?"

He had wanted to ask her for hours; now that he had, he was thinking of Lelian with his long wrists and his soft natural hair, kneeling at the marshy edge of the Atlantic to touch his fingers to the sky reflecting like faience between stems of cordgrass and say, in a wonderment so close to pain that Anson almost did not want to look at him, *It's singing.* Tony in his indefatigable denim jacket, leaning on the rail of the Summer Street Bridge to watch the moon jellies blooming in the cloudy green water, some July past when he still had hair for the harbor breeze to tousle. *You can't imagine what it looked like at its height. I've been shown it and I can't imagine. It was any fishing port at the turn of the century and it was a beacon, like the Windward Islands were before it. Like a bell sounding, Y'ha-nthlei resounding with it. Strong as the scars left where two worlds meet.*

Meredith murmuring sleepily from the other side of a well-worn feather pillow, *Just as well. I'd follow you down and then where would you be?*

"What did you think you were going to find? Innsmouth was scattered in 1928—it was camouflaged as a bootlegging bust, but it was a tiny little genocide, right here in the heart of open-minded Massachusetts. They took people away. The government wouldn't say where, but we know most of them never made it down to the sea. They burned the church. They burned *books*. Supposedly they even tried to dynamite the reef, though that might just be newspaper exaggerations of the time—it's not like there are a lot of reliable records between the federal cover-up and the razing of the town, everything but sowing the ground with salt. So whatever there was of a centralized religion of Dagon, it all precipitated out to less-than-half-breeds like my family, who were far enough from the epicenter of Innsmouth that the Bureau of Investigation didn't come knocking at their doors to ask if it could maybe measure their skulls and borrow their family heirlooms, thank you. Or my cousin Tony, whose great-grandparents got the hell out of town in the middle of the night and never came back in their lifetimes; that was their grandchildren or *their* children, decades later, banking that there was no one left in Gloucester or Ipswich or Newburyport who would recognize the old look outside of urban legends—*and the fish-people'll get you if you don't watch out!* Generations dying land-stranded to keep the secret, or simply because they didn't know what to do when they started to change. There are true-bred half-deep now and do you know how old they are? My age, maybe. That's how long it took to reestablish the old ways with Y'ha-nthlei. Or so my mother told us, before she went down." Suddenly exhausted, he trailed off, "It's not like she talks to me these days." From the way the silence rang in the room, he was afraid he had been shouting.

Gorgo said very tightly, arms crossed in her hoodie and her eyes as black as the benthic zone, "I didn't know. I didn't care. I just wanted the sea."

"I'm sorry," Anson said, and meant it.

She made a restless half-shrug in response, something like scorn

in the movement: flicking off his sympathy. “I do, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Dream of Y’ha-nthlei.” Her eyes closed and opened with the nictitating membrane across them, glaucous as sea-ice. “I dream of cities and they sing like whales. I dream of strangers in a sunken reef and they call me by name. I can drink salt water, I can lie in a cold bath for hours. I just can’t fucking *breathe*.”

He could see her then, momentary and clear as the dreams he had never shared: a black-haired woman with unbending eyes, her duffel bag over her shoulder and her breath clouding less than it should in the dry freezing air, waiting at train stations and bus stops like a mermaid in winter clothing, hellbent as a salmon on its spawning grounds. The moon lulled her down the tide-road every night in dreams, the sea-doors opened to her from between the lines of her father’s book. Her head already knew the weight of Y’ha-nthlei’s jewelry, undying gold and the living ornament of sea-things that had died from the waters above millennia ago; her hands had learned the writhe and hollow of sculptures that had never seen the sun, fin-flicked for centuries by the passage of suppliants and priests. If she had not yet tasted family blood, she knew its secret tang of salt and iron on her tongue. But she stuck in the sea’s throat: the road broke up like spring ice beneath her, the jewels turned to half-picked cockles and rotting weeds, the doors slammed closed. The only blood she swallowed was her own. It was no leap to imagine her in Trina’s tiny bathroom, running the tap cold until even her siren’s fingers ached testing the water, turning headfirst into its shallow, sufficient sanctuary like a dolphin gathering for the dive. From the other side of the water, she could see the abyss opening for her, even if it was the wrong one.

He said abruptly, “Get your coat,” and after she had stared at him for a moment, “Or find one. You’re right. We’ll both do better with some fresh air.”

§

From the white curl of the tide-line, Gorgo called, “Your cousin’s

going to shit when he finds out you let me out of the house."

They were not the only people on Good Harbor Beach in the dead eye of winter, but at least they were not picking their way between beach towels and folding chairs, children clambering up the massive ledges of granite streaked weed-green and brown as shipwrecked wood. The clouds had turned shale-grey with afternoon, but patches of sunlight brightened and faded as randomly on the strand as the watering in silk. The tide was drawing out, patterning scales into the sand as it ran; it left stones and shells behind like windbreaks. Anson had counted three razor clam shells and the sea-matted feathers of some bird's outstretched, amputated wing. Gorgo stooped and bent far more often, but he could not see what she was collecting—Codd marbles, dogwinkles, the hairpin bones of a flounder for all he knew. The coat she had found in the bedroom closet was probably Tony's, a men's black leather blazer that made her look like a spy in a '60's television show so long as she kept her hood back; when she pulled it up, Anson refrained from telling her Meredith's latest rant about hipster fashion. He called back now, "My cousin has been disagreeing with me ever since I blew off a Splashdown show to make out with the smartest boy in Philosophy of Physics," and hoped the movement he could see across the pale smudge of her face was a smile. He did not expect it. Careless as she looked with her hands in the blazer's pockets and the hoodie unzipped—no gloves, no scarf, only the candy-striped Breton shirt between herself and the teeth of February—she had trembled like a hunting cat at the first salt smell on the wind. Past Thatcher Road, she was hardly seeing him at all.

He had left two text messages for Tony and a quick hand-scrawled note, tucked into the mailbox with the keys. There was nothing to be done about the blazer or the black combat boots Gorgo had borrowed from the assortment under the coat rack, but he had washed the dishes and left them drying in a slant of cider-gold light and written another letter for Trina, signed with his own name after all. He had met her maybe twice in the ten years since Tony had introduced them, a college medievalist turned tech writer with a feathery brush of sugar-brown hair and a Greek fisherman's cap she

had plated like a backpack with buttons and pins; he had never seen the old look in her, but then again he had never asked what she saw in him beyond Tony's vague and all-encompassing *cousin*. After another look at his thank-you note, he had shelved the rest of the soups from Tedeschi's in her pantry and restacked all thirty-three issues of *National Geographic*.

They had found nothing after half an hour, but he had not really imagined they would, not after nearly a day's worth of high and low tides and beachcombers. There were Canada geese in the yellowed saltgrass beyond the boulders, black-and-white mergansers and some rusty-backed waterbird he did not recognize bobbing farther out on the wind-rucked water; he bent to turn over a tumble of seaweed, reddish-olive strings and pods as cold and rubbery as a monster-movie prop, but there was nothing beneath it except more sky-grey sand. He had already passed a pair of well-bundled dog-walkers and a runner in an angelfish's electric red and black. At the corner of his eye, he saw Gorgo crouched with her fingers in the running tide. She stood with something shining in her hands: when it dripped through her fingers, he saw it was only the sea.

She glanced up only a little when Anson joined her, eyes half-lidded against the wind. "Recess over?"

"Just seeing how you are."

"Still breathing." Her voice cocked challengingly. "Why?"

He and Lelian had been the ones to pack out Isobel's apartment, scarcely a week into his junior year of college when she finally went down to the sea. She had been living out of her studio by then, a high-windowed rough masonry loft in a former warehouse overlooking the Fort Point Channel: light-filled, empty of almost everything else but a futon mattress in a nest of blankets and the necessary paraphernalia of painting, finished canvases stacked against the walls, unfinished ones still on the easel or lying on the broad-beamed floor. Pieces of light-colored clothing looked like shed skins, dropped haphazardly among the stacks of oversized books and CDs. Even her keepsakes were few and scattered, turning up inside boxes of empty paint tubes or hidden in a rack of solvents, fixatives, and rags—the sand-dollar-stoppered green glass jar in

which she had kept Gibraltars and Black Jacks, the string of iridescent purple plastic beads Anson had caught at an unexpected parade at the Big E, a blue-and-white T-shirt from the New England Aquarium, the very last time they had all gone together and Isobel spent nearly all her time in front of the electric eel, gloved fingertips pressed to the glass as though caressing the silt-cloud softness of its skin, listening to the crackle of its attention ranging through its artificial river basin. They did not work in silence, but there seemed very little to say: in some ways it was a wonder that she had hung on to anything of the land at all. There were damp marks all across the floorboards, tracked stickily into her sheets. The harbor-smell in the linseed-tinted air was dizzyingly strong.

He had not planned to take any of her paintings, despite the knowledge that she had left them to anyone who cared; he knew Tony had always loved the smear of red pouring into yellow and sea-green called *we paint our own doors* and that she had painted *the heart's hook tugs home* for Lelian, blurring tetra-blue and silver into the warm burnt umber of his skin, but Anson at the end of his sophomore year had fallen headlong into Norman Bel Geddes and the industrial design of the future and felt obscurely overextended taking care of the one painting he owned. All the same, he could not pack them up without knowing they were the last he would ever see of Isobel. She had worked to the end in the deep, vibrating colors she had loved, even as her palette narrowed to a hot-hearted undersea and already abstract forms diffused into an unending tidal roil. The final canvases looked as thickly sculpted as knifework, but she had used her own clawed webs on them, her own milky spit to moisten the oils. Then he found the small paintings, none larger than a page from a hardcover book: she had scratched words through the heavy impasto of each one, a mosaic of fragmentary litanies: *come deep-spawning father come mother of endless waves come treasurer breaker of all our salt-bottled hearts.* He was not crying when Lelian found him, coming upstairs with more boxes from the car, but he was making sounds he did not realize until his cousin put an arm around him and the embarrassment brought him back to himself. Shaving his head had only made Lelian hotter; it had not made him any more

interested in big geeky white boys, especially not ones who had just broken up with their first boyfriends in an argument that began over Brian Molko. But he held Anson through his dry grief, and found him extra garbage bags and packing peanuts to cushion the five small canvases with, and said nothing afterward that made it worse. He locked up the studio behind them and turned in the keys.

None of them, Anson had realized then, were grieving. He could not expect them to. They had not lost anything, not even time.

The wind was skimming sand off the dunes like spray from the crest of a wave, salt-fine and stinging. Beside him, Gorgo had her hands deep in the blazer's pockets, her hair spilling and her face set toward the sea; he saw her bruised profile, impassive as a coin, but her gills gaped redly beneath her chin. He shrugged, a little helplessly, a little humorously: it was nothing more than the truth.

"If the sea needs a gatekeeper, it should be someone who can swim better than me."

The tide's breath broke, one vast exhalation or an endless drawing in. Gorgo stirred and Anson braced himself not to hold her back, but she was only reaching for a pebble from the retreating wave, cormorant-black with a white granite scrawl through its heart. "More weight," she said, straight-faced. When she dropped it into her pocket, it clacked.

Anson said seriously, "There's always the sacrifices. At the hinges of the year, like your father wrote: for the mother and the father, for the sun and the moon, for the earth and the sea. And always family. You'd be eligible. They have to be blood of the sea's blood to work." He could not imagine her consenting in a crown of kelp and the stinging frills of sea nettle, bowing her head to anything, but he had never put his name in the lottery, either, for the garlands or the knife.

Her grin was as sharp and unexpected as the snap of a moray's jaws, viperfish-wide. "If I want the sea to have my blood, I'll do it my own way."

He laughed suddenly, thinking of the time he had met Tony at Cafe Sushi and his cousin had been waiting for him downstairs, a cigarette flaring between his cupped hands like an informant in a

detective film, and Anson who had never seen his cousin smoke anything but weed had blurted, *What the hell, Tony? Does nicotine even work on fish?* It had been a joke between them for a little while, as long as anything lasted easily with Tony's evasions and Anson's impatience. He could more easily imagine a life without loving, long-haul-driving Meredith than without Tony, grappled to one another with genetics and familiarity and exasperation that transcended love; he would have to someday, before it was time to gather at the ruined harbor where the barks and brigantines of Innsmouth had once set sail for the East Indies and the South Seas, kindle the shore fires and chant the litanies and watch for the answer from Devil Reef, from the world beneath the waters of the world. The scattered children of Innsmouth, slowly migrating home. He had not lied to Gorgo: he had never walked into the ocean. He had jumped, drunkenly, and been dragged out retching onto the harborwalk at Rowes Wharf; he smelled the sea in Boston, wild as a gull's cry on the wind, and it was only distance and salt. If he lived to see the next city shine like a bell between worlds, it would only be another shore to stand on.

In the tarry swirl of seaweed at his feet, a warm color blinked like a lobster buoy. It was the plastic ring and cap off a milk bottle, lying red as a channel light in a soda-froth of foam; it was the sea giving back nothing that was not already the land's. Anson palmed it anyway and turned to look for Gorgo. The sea wind had already reeled her from him, windblown at the waves' edge with her hands full of salt and her eyes as huge and black as time.

There was no following his cousin into the sea, any of them; he followed her up the shoreline instead, looking despite himself for drowned books, bottles, hearts rolling on the tide.

Every Hole in the Earth We Will Claim As Our Home

Gemma Files

Uh, hi, yeah. Is this the Let's Talk Hotline? For… mental health issues, and stuff? Yeah, so I need to speak to somebody, but first off, I have a question: this is anonymous, right? I mean, you don't need my name, do you? Just to talk?

Okay, good. Good. That's what I thought.

All right, so… before we start, I need to know: does confidentiality apply here? I mean, I know you're probably not a doctor or anything, just a volunteer at best. If I tell you what's bothering me, though, is it true you really *can't* tell anyone else? 'Cause if I can't be sure—all right, good. That's good, too.

(I really *do* want to tell someone, you see. But if I go ahead then you can't break your word and pass on what I'm going to say, not to anybody. It's in… both our best interests you keep to that one simple rule, believe it or not.)

All right, yes, I believe you, I'm sorry I asked. It's just that—well. I just *had* to.

Look, I'll be straight with you, okay? I don't know what kind of good this'll do, telling you what I'm going to tell you. But I have to do it, anyhow; I can't not. And I don't want to write it down somewhere, to risk somebody else finding it, reading it… don't want to document it, on the off-chance that doing so will somehow make it realer than I want it to be. No. I just want to *say* it, this whole thing, straight out, to someone who doesn't know anything about me, someone I'm probably never going to talk to again. Someone who can't even *see* me. And then I want to hang up and walk away, and never think about any of it again. That way, it's sort of like it never happened. Like I can just… let it go and forget about it.

You're my single best bet, in that respect.

Okay, so—one last thing. You're not taping this, are you? No?

You promise?

(I mean, I guess I'd really have no way of knowing, if you were. Have to just take it on faith.)

…well, anyhow.

Might as well start, then.

§

So I've been working Sick Kids' Hospital here in Toronto as my primary security site for… three years now, come January, and I mainly do night shift, which is about as stressful as you'd think it was likely to be. Worse for the nurses and the doctors, obviously, but the things we see coming in, the kids on the ward, the long-term cases… it wears on you. I'm the only one at my station who hasn't transferred out yet, gone somewhere else at least once, for a kind of mental rest. I don't know why, really –maybe I'm lazy, like my Mom used to say. Maybe I'm scared of change, so when I finally get somewhere permanent, I tend to stick to it like glue.

Anyway, the floor I work most often is the ground floor, General Intake and Emergency, and my main circuit covers the waiting room. That's where all the kids and caretakers who don't have appointments have to go, to get triaged through Emergency. Mostly it's accidents, or things getting swallowed, though sometimes there's bugs and other symptoms; anything a GP on call doesn't feel qualified to treat at home, anything a hotline flags as particularly weird-sounding. Ninety-nine percent of the time these don't come too much, thank God, but sometimes…

What we've been getting a rise in lately is kids who can't be vaccinated catching things from kids whose parents opt not to have them vaccinated for one reason or another, but still send them out into the world. Like that measles outbreak at Disneyland. Most of the time, the result looks horrible, but isn't necessarily life-threatening—the kids are segregated for a while, treated as best they can be, emerge with a few scars. It's like chickenpox.

The worst-case scenario, though—and there're always going to be a few of those, statistically.

Well.

I don't know if you ever heard the story about how Roald Dahl's daughter died, but it was of encephalitis—complications from getting measles. The thing that always amazed me was that when Dahl heard there'd been measles at the school his kids went to, he begged his brother-in-law, who was a doctor, to get him enough gamma globulin to protect his children. But the guy could only get enough for one of them, so he opted to give it to Dahl's son Theo, and said: *oh, go ahead and let the girls catch it, it'll be good for them*.

So one of them did and she was okay, but the other—Olivia—wasn't. She got sick, and slow, and sleepy, and their local GP came over and took a look and said it was probably just a cold, but keep watching her. And then, later that day, she opened her eyes but she looked… weird, not like herself, like she wasn't really seeing anything, you know? So they loaded her into the car and took off, but by the time they got her to the hospital it was too late. It took about a day more, but they finally called it.

When he wrote about it later on, Dahl said he went in to kiss her and she was still warm, and he asked the guy he was with why. Like: *she's still warm, why is she so warm?* And all the other guy said was: *it happens.*

But that's how it goes, right? I mean, Sick Kids' is good, top of the line, no question. Parents come from all over the world, just 'cause they know how good it is… but kids still die, sometimes, and you don't get used to it. You can't.

So what happened is they brought this boy in with measles, his mom and his dad, about three and a half weeks ago. I can't tell you his name, obviously. But it was the same story, or a lot like it: presented with fever and rash, sick and sleepy, slow. Eyes rolled up. Had a seizure when he first got there, almost the first five minutes after registration, like he knew he was finally in the right place for it. So they rushed him upstairs and the mom and dad stayed downstairs together, waiting to find out, until a doctor came down and told them it was encephalitis; kid's whole brain was swelled up, right down to the stem. And he was alive for now but in a coma, and they didn't know when he'd wake back up, or if. They didn't know

anything.

Mom and Dad sat there together for a few hours more and then Dad had to go, ’cause he was on shift someplace else. Mom wouldn't leave, though. Didn't have anyone to call to come sit with her, I guess, though I heard her talking on her phone to somebody—might've been her job, maybe—and explaining what was going on. But she just sat there alone after that. Around 23:00, I brought her some coffee, and she took it, but it's not like she spoke, even to say thanks. That was okay; I didn't expect it. She needed her time.

Sometimes I'd look over, and I thought she was praying.

Things thin out after midnight, even near the E.R. So that's when I notice there's this other woman sitting in the back, a few rows of chairs away—spotted her when I left to do rounds, then saw she was still there when I came back. Had a book in her hands, even had it open, but she wasn't reading, not really. She was watching the measles-kid's mom from the corner of her eye, and… uh… listening, I think.

It sounds bad—it *is* bad—but if this woman hadn't read to me so much as middle-class white, even at a distance, I probably would have paid more attention to her, or had a few red flags go up. But she did, so I just sort of looked her up and down, then filed her away: an older lady, upper forties to mid-fifties, not fat but big, all over; eyes light, grayish or blueish, hair light, maybe mouse with a little blonde, or a little gray. She looked like a teacher or a nanny, somebody's relative or whatever. A counselor.

Around 2:00, I went to the bathroom and when I came back, this woman was sitting next to the kid's mom, her arm around her shoulders. And I was sure they must've known each other from somewhere, because the mom, she had her head down, just letting the woman hold her, kind of—shaking a bit, it looked like, from where I was. Like she was crying.

Okay.

So that was odd, but… I didn't know what to do, or even if I *should* do anything. I mean, it didn't seem like the mom thought the woman was bothering her; she seemed grateful, or what have you. I could have called the doc working her son's case, but what would

that amount to? Nothing, probably. So…

… after a while, I got up, moved a bit closer—got myself a coffee, this time, and sat down where the woman'd used to be, the first time I saw her. Like I was taking my break, which I was. Then bent a little forward, enough so I could hear what she was saying.

Yeah, I know: believe me, I know. That's why I'm telling this to *you*, instead of—

Well okay, I don't really know why, myself. I just… want to tell somebody. Somebody who can't tell anybody else.

The woman, this older woman, she was murmuring in the mom's ear, really soft. She sounded reasonable. Like she'd done this before. And here's what she was saying, okay, as far as I can remember…

(… and I have *tried* to remember, since then, believe me. Very hard.)

She said—

§

In Malaysia, after a tsunami comes, after the wave laps up and goes back out again, strange things are found. Dead bodies, yes, lots of those—like during that last one, when my family and I were there, celebrating. My husband had gotten a promotion, and the fare was cheap. Something exotic to do together, before the kids were too old to want to travel with us anymore, before they had their own lives. The wave came while we were walking down to the beach, that time, and it took everyone away, my son, my husband, my daughter… everyone but me. They found me in a tree, three days later, where I'd tied myself to the trunk with my towel and been wrenched from every angle, so hard my ribs broke. And I never saw my husband or my son again, not even in the tents where they put the bodies they found after, covered in mud and sand.

But I did find her at last, my daughter, and I found someone else, as well. And that made all the difference.

There was no hospital, nowhere to put the sick and dying, except for next to the dead. She was in the middle of a group of

other survivors, only barely still alive—crushed and broken, bruised so badly I didn't recognize her until she made a noise that sounded like "Mama." I don't know if she knew I was there, or if she only wanted to think I was. Her skin was purple, her eyes black with blood.

The water had torn everything I remembered of her away.

So I sat there for as long as I could, not even able to hold her hand, because every time I touched her she screamed. And when the sun began to fall I got up and walked away, back down to the beach, or where the beach had been. I stood there in the dying light and wondered whether or not I should wade out into the tide, walk forward until the undertow found me. I wondered what was left for me here, on dry land, when the ocean had already eaten everything I loved.

That's when she came to me, the old woman. That's when she put her hand in mine, cold even in that wet, terrible heat, and began to speak, in much the same way I'm speaking to you now—the same tone, even. As though she wanted to make me feel better and this was all she had to offer.

She told me about the things that get left behind after every wave, things from the bottom of the sea. Things that sometimes, in times of trouble, families will adopt and tame—to be a familiar, a fetch, an injection of luck in the wake of terrible tragedy. The pelesit, which looks like a cricket, a tiny green cricket with soft underwater skin in place of armor, which enters into the mouth of a dying person and bores a hole through the back of their throat, into the skull, the base of the brain. And the polong, something neither man nor woman, its toes and fingers webbed, with lidless eyes and gills—equally tiny, equally green. The polong, which rides the pelesit through that hole and makes its home where the spine's roots begin, knitting its new body back together around it. Making sure whichever family member lies on the very verge of death stays alive, unable to cough out their soul and pass on.

You can have her back again, she told me, if you are willing. It is possible. A great sacrifice, and a great blessing.

Would it really be her, though? I asked, not looking 'round. And heard the old lady laugh, not unkindly.

Who can say? she replied. *How would you know, were it not? It seemed so, to me; it seems so still, even now. For just as the* pelesit *does the polong's bidding, the* polong *is a quick study. Sometimes an echo is enough. Sometimes anything is better than nothing.*

Losing a child is like a disaster, like losing the whole world, but I tell you—you can survive this, with help. The pelesit *and the* polong *can help you survive, along with their makers … the great old ones beneath the sea, who lie chained deep enough that the creatures they spawn in their exile inevitably fall upward, seeking to seed themselves once more along drier shores, from which our gods once banished them. The cracks of the world, deep down and hidden, where all such things abide.*

And I thought for a while, after that, watching the sea, the old woman at my side. We stood there a long time, her and I, neither of us moving, until the sun sunk completely and the moon rose, hidden behind a bank of clouds. 'Til the sea was black, entirely, right to the horizon, and that veiled moon and some distant stars gave the only light.

Why would they do this for me, these "great old ones"? I asked her, at last. To which she replied, perhaps with a shrug: *because it pleases them, and appalls the gods. Because they crave revenge. Ask rather, since it is the only pleasure left to them—why would they not?*

So this is what I can tell you, these many years later, just as that old woman once told me: my daughter is alive, today, because of what I learned in the tsunami's wake … her, or enough of her for me to love, at the very least. A tiny person riding a demon cricket, a rag and a bone and a hank of hair, snips and snails and puppy-dog tails; all of this or none of it, I can't know for sure, and never will. But I find I don't much care, either.

This world is full of terrible things, you see, all over—some tiny, some immense, all hiding underneath the world's face, like maggots inside a wound. They came from the places we don't see. And they don't care about us, about how deeply we care for each other; they have their own plans and schemes, great dark engines of vengeance already set spinning, stretching out far beyond anything we can

imagine. And they probably wish us nothing but ill, if they wish us anything at all—but I don't care about them, and you don't have to, either. All I know, all I have clear and present proof of, is that when their wants intersect with ours, we can benefit, if we are brave. That whenever the things we do or allow to be done help them get closer to achieving their own needs, their hungers, then sometimes—because it amuses them—they'll do the same for us.

Because of them, I have my daughter back again, or close as makes no never-mind. Because of them, I … who once had nothing… now have something, at the very least. And that alone can be enough, that infinitesimally small comfort, if you only want it to be.

The truth is, we don't owe them anything, and we never did: not love, not fear, not even worship. All we ever have to do is give them what they want, and trust they'll do the same.

It's like God, that way, but better. Because it's real.

§

She went on and on like that, and by the end the measles-boy's mom was just sitting there, letting her hold her, not crying anymore—eyes wide, mouth shut. *Listening*.

"So you tell me," the other woman asked her, why should he die of something that should have been wiped out twenty years ago, your boy, just because of other people's selfishness? "Why shouldn't you be selfish, too? Love always is, you know, down at its very core. It just wants what it wants, and to hell with everything—*everybody*—else."

Measles-boy's mom shook her head. "Patient and kind," she told her, "that's what the Bible says. Love, it wants … what the other person wants."

"Are you telling me he wouldn't want to live, then? To die and leave you behind, make you sad, leave you all alone? But no, you can't tell me that; you're his mother, after all. You know what's best for him, always, better than he knows himself."

“But it wouldn’t be him. You told me so, just then. You told me —”

“You couldn’t know, yes, that’s what I said. Just like I can’t tell it’s not, with my daughter. And you won’t care.”

§

You with me so far? You get what I'm saying? Okay, good.

So there I am, listening in, and I'm wondering… well, what I should do, I guess. What I *could* do. Ask measles-boy's mom if she was being bothered? Ask the other woman why she was there? It's after 3:00 by now and the whole hospital's as quiet as it ever gets, like it's part of some kind of dream-world—everything faint and far away, the kind of echoing quiet that's almost loud as noise. Smell of bleach everywhere, and antibacterial hand-soap, no matter what kind of spray you put on top of it afterward; doesn't matter what time of year it is or what the weather might be outside, ’cause in here, it's always cold enough that at the end of the night you can go home and stand under a shower for, like, fifteen minutes straight, but you still can't get warm. I mean, it's like, like…

… the bottom of the sea.

Then my radio goes off, gives this big squeal of feedback, and it's the front desk, reminding me I have to do rounds. And neither woman looked ’round when it happened, but I jumped anyhow, like I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't—got up real quick, hustled myself away. Did the circuit extra-slow and checked everything twice, just to make myself feel better.

When I came back, finally, they were both gone: measles-boy's mom, the other woman. The place was empty, and it didn't start filling up again ’til maybe five in the morning.

Neither of them came back at any point during that process, though, that I could see.

So I booked off and signed out at 6:00, like I always do, and I went home and I went to bed. And I dreamed…

§

Okay, enough about that. I don't think it matters what I dreamed.

Next day was my day off, a whole 24 hours—just enough time to fuck my schedule up completely, I always say—but the night after that I came back, at 6:00. Measles-boy's mom and dad weren't there and neither was the other lady. Around 8:00, I finally got up the courage to ask the doc on measles-boy's case what'd happened and she said that the kid had gone home. Made an amazing recovery. Said the mom came back around nine that morning with "that friend of hers" and her friend's kid, a little girl, and they went in and spent a couple minutes with him, and then all the machines went nuts, and when they charged in thinking he was flatlining, they found him sitting up in bed, eyes open, totally awake. By evening his rash was gone, and by the next morning all his panels were clear, so they let him go home.

That's amazing, I said, and the doc shrugged. *It happens*, she told me. Which kind of made the hairs on my neck go up, you know? Like Roald Dahl, asking that guy: *she's still warm, why is she still so warm?* And him saying—

Anyhow.

The rest of that night I spent in the waiting room, off and on, surfing around on my phone. I checked out the *polong* and the *pelesit*, Wikipedia'd them, the whole thing. Not a lot about either, which happens, when it's something from another culture. But I do remember I came across this thing in a forum somewhere, way down on some sub-thread I couldn't find again, when I went back to look, about how this guy's grandma told him that people with a *polong* and a *pelesit* inside them don't get any older, because if they did the *polong* and *pelesit* would start to grow 'til they just… sloughed the whole person they're inside off, I guess, like a skin. So they stay small, and the person stays the same age they were when it they came to live inside him or her, forever. Forever, or until what's inside them moves on.

'Cause that's the other part of it—this rumor somebody else had heard, that after a while, the *polong* and the *pelesit* can maybe start… subdividing, tearing down the middle, so there's two of each. Like

an amoeba. I mean, they still have to reproduce, right? 'Cause everything does. And if two *polongs* and two *pelesits* stay inside the same host, it's bad, obviously. They might start to fight, eventually, 'cause there's not enough room for them all. Might even kill each other, at which point the person they're inside dies right along with them. So that's when the head of the host's family—might be the mother, the father, a sister or brother or aunt or uncle, whoever, the one who wrangles them, basically, so they can keep on being lucky for everyone else—that's when this head goes out, and starts looking for a new… person. Host. Home.

Somebody, anybody, who somebody *else* doesn't want to let go.

Sounds a whole lot like that other lady, to me—which kind of makes me wonder just how long ago that tsunami was, for her. How long her daughter's been a *little* girl, exactly.

§

So this is more than three weeks ago by now, almost a month, like I said. And I'm trying to forget I ever heard about this stuff, though I can't say it's easy…

… but last night, when I was on site, measles-boy comes back in for a check-up, to make sure he really was fully recovered: just him and his mom, no dad, plus that other woman, and what I guess must've been her own kid. Her creepy, creepy little—

That's not the worst part, though.

So the other woman and her daughter sit there waiting, her stroking the girl's hair while the girl reads some magazine or other. And then, after the check-up, the doctor, the boy and his mom come out—boy rushes over and grabs the girl's hands, they go off to play in the corner or whatever, sit down next to each other, start gabbing away. And it's time for me to do my rounds, but as I'm leaving the doctor says she needs to discuss some stuff with the mom, and the other woman opts to go in with her, so that's happening just as I'm walking out.

Got through the door, almost kept walking, but—something stopped me. I didn't know what it was, at first, but then I realized: it

was the quiet. Like the second the kids knew they were alone, they'd just… stopped. And even then I knew I didn't want to go back, like, at all, but … I *needed* to go back. To see what was happening, when they thought nobody else was around to see. So I step to the right of the closed door, staying on my side, and peer back through the window into the waiting room.

You want to know?

Well, too bad. I'm gonna tell you anyways.

They were just… sitting there. Next to each other, still, but not touching, not talking, not looking at each other. Not interacting at all. Inert.

I watched them for a while, just like that, and nothing changed, ever: seconds ticking by on the clock, smell of bleach, distant echo. Nothing else, until—

I took a breath and stepped back through the door, and both their sets of eyes flicked over, locked on me, like they were drawn by my movement. Followed me around the room, heads staying exactly where they already were. And when I stopped a couple of feet away, making like I was checking something… when I stayed real still, listened real hard, without even knowing I was doing it…

That's when I heard it. That little, tiny—*noise* going back and forth between them, each to each. Like crickets tuning up. Like mosquitos: that whine, that trill. That… *chittering*.

I heard it. I *still* hear it.

Coming from deep inside their throats.

§

So that's the story.

I mean, I guess I could ask for another site, try to get a transfer, if it bothers me so much, right? And it's not like they're coming back, probably. But I don't *know*. I never will. And everything just… reminds me of that, every time I go in to work. All night. Almost every night.

This's gonna help, though. I'm almost sure.

I do keep on having these dreams, still. The ones I didn't want

to tell you about. Like I'm at the bottom of the ocean, but not really *really* far down, because there's still light enough to see by, at least: blue-white sand underneath me, blue water up above, black cliff falling away behind, like I'm floating above the Marianas Trench or something. And stuff is… falling, gently. Not down on top of me, no. It's falling up, from all around, like gravity's reversed. Like it's got somewhere else it wants to be.

Little green somethings, all legs and wings and antennae, all multi-lensed eyes. Little green arms and legs, webbed hands and feet, eyes without eyelids, fixed gills. The *pelesit* and the *polong*, together as always: schools of them eddying surfaceward, like fish, like krill. Ignoring me completely.

Leaving me there, so cold and alone.

And I know, I know, without having seen, without understanding how: just *know*, that's all. How above me is a door, a watery blue lid, and below me is a door, white sand made from ground-fine bone. A door behind me. A door on either side. A door in front of me, opening.

Nothing but doors, is what I'm saying. That's our world, not that we can ever see it, unless we're somehow made to; doors everywhere, and all of 'em locked, until they're open. Because none of us have the keys—we're not *important* enough for that, oh no. The hinges are rusted shut. So we can knock and knock if we want, if we know to, pound and scream and weep and moan for entry, but it's only ever what's on the other side that gets to turn the handle. And only if we've paid enough for it—whatever the hell *they* think is enough.

But it never is enough, is it? Not in the end.

That's how it seems to me, anyways. But I don't want to think about it anymore, so I'm not going to. You'll have to instead, from now on, and they'll just have to be satisfied with that, or go begging.

Why do you think I told you this whole damn story, in the first place?

I'm hanging up now.

But Only Because I Love You

Molly Tanzer

The sky above is impossibly blue, striped with bright bands of clouds tinged pink and orange with the coming sunrise. There are a few stars still sparkling in the heavens, and the moon, bigger than it looks beyond the borders of this land, hangs low and near.

The pack of spotted jackals is also near. Their baying is a goad. If we do not find some shelter, some escape, we are done for. The wind whips our scent into their long noses, maddening them. They will tear us to pieces if they catch us.

I am not worried. I have no reason to be. Not yet.

We are all gasping as we run up the side of a low hillock, even me, long used to ascents. I am weighted down with most of our gear and our water reserve, and that, I am less used to, though the last month has hardened me considerably.

"Come *on*, Bridget!" shouts Dr. Sangare, pelting pell-mell down the side of the hill, nearly slipping on the waving grasses. One hand keeps her tattered, dusty bowler in place against the gusts, the other windmills her back into balance as her pack slams hard on her hip. Her tweed jacket flies open, revealing the knives strapped across her chest. She is good with them, but not good enough to stop a pack of ravenous dogs from rending us limb from limb. "We must get to that… thingy!"

The *thingy* is a rocky prominence in the distance. If we were closer to home, I would think it was a cairn to mark the path for travelers. But we are not close to home, and here there are no marked paths. Or travelers, for that matter.

"I don't think," gasps Bridget, "we'll make it." She is struggling too, nearly tripping as her skirts whip and snap around her ankles like a prayer flag. The leather-and-bronze hip holster glimmers bright as her flaming hair; she is an excellent shot, but the dogs are too many, too quick to make her superb marksmanship useful.

"We *must* make it," says Dr. Sangare. Her fierce determination steadies Bridget. They are a good team, they complement one another.

Neither calls to me. Why should they? I have proven myself strong and reliable time and again, and besides, I cannot return their encouragement. Anyway, I was not hired to cheer them onward. I was hired to carry into Leng what they could not manage by themselves, and haul back what they raided from the barrows of her ancient queens.

As we keep running, the spire in the distance takes on new details. To my surprise, it does appear to be a cairn—but an enormous one. Vaguely pyramidal in shape, wind and rain has smoothed away the rougher edges of the piled boulders; some have tumbled from the heights and lie scattered about the base.

"It's too far." Bridget is lagging behind her companion, I can see her legs are shaking with fatigue. "Dily… I… I don't think we'll be dying rich."

"What's our plan once we're there?"

Dr. Sangare's question distracts Bridget from her worries; she is already assessing the tactical possibilities, and runs the faster for it. "To the top," she says. "High ground. We'll each take up a station, pick off as many as we can with boulders, rocks, my pistol, whatever we can find. Maybe if we keep them at bay for long enough they'll get bored."

"All right," says Dr. Sangare. Sweat gleams on her dark forehead, it glistens like stars against the night sky. "Got that, Krishna?"

She looks back. I nod.

"He's *smiling*," observes Bridget, as we redouble our pace. "The fuck is he smiling about? Doesn't he know we're in danger?"

"Try asking him," says Dr. Sangare.

"*Right*," says Bridget.

If I could, I would tell them that we are in danger… but not in danger of dying. I would know. But I cannot tell them, so I do not, and we run on in silence.

Though they carry less than I, they have more trouble climbing

up the slippery rocks when we reach them. Well, neither grew up trekking from village to village over dangerous passes, or scrambling up escarpments to get at berries or birds' eggs.

As the jackals bound closer, a slavering, yipping, howling mass of furry, toothy hunger, Bridget slips a second time. I sling off my pack and go down to help her up.

"Thanks, Krishna," she wheezes, as she clambers up beside me, now marginally safer.

Unlike many visitors to my home village, Bridget and Dr. Sangare have always been polite. I nod in response to her thanks, and shouldering the pack, I point higher.

Dr. Sangare has gotten above us, squatting on the top of the rock pile. The sun has risen, and she tips up the brim of her bowler, squinting in the dawn light.

"There's an awful lot of them," she observes.

"We'll do what we can. I mean, we've made it this far." Bridget hauls herself onto a flattish boulder and sets to looking over her pistol. "Krishna, anything to add?"

I shrug.

"Even facing down death, still silent as the grave?" Bridget shakes her head. The handful of ruddy curls that have escaped her tight bun bounce.

"Here they come," says Dr. Sangare. Her black eyes glint as she raises a boulder the size of my head over her own. Hurling it down upon the jackals, it bounces once, twice, then strikes one in the face. Its jaw is torn off and the resulting red spray mists those next to it. The jawless jackal runs another step, then falls over twitching.

The dead jackal's companions pause for a moment to look at the ruined corpse of their companion, then turn to look at us. One growls.

"Woo!" cries Dr. Sangare, pointing at the dogs. "That's right, you mangy mongrels!"

Dr. Sangare turns around, looking this way and that for another rock. She spies a candidate, resting at the meeting point of two large boulders. She steps out onto the flatter, lower of the two. It wobbles beneath her foot, and tips inward.

"Dily!" cries Bridget, leaping to her partner's side, but the doctor is already sliding, slipping into the black chasm. She screams, once, and then we hear a terrible thump.

Bridget is there, kneeling, peering down, calling Dr. Sangare's name. There is no response. I peek over the edge; it's impossible to see anything.

A growl turns my attention behind me. Three jackals have gained the top of the mound. One barks. Another snarls. I think about what color the snarl might have been, in my mind, before my color-sense changed. Before I could only see one color in my mind. One color that meant one thing.

They advance. I make my decision.

I push Bridget into the blackness. She screams as I jump in after. But of course, I do not make a sound as I fall.

§

I used to hear in color, and count and smell, too. The sound of Mother patting out parathas was warm golden yellow, the smell of our yak a fresh green; a pile of five stones was maroon, but a pile of seven, pale purple. I didn't *see* these colors, not exactly… Zopa, our yak, was creamy white and warm brown, and stones were… stone-colored. Just the same, I knew the colors were there, hovering at the edges of my understanding of the world, but vital to it. When I thought hard about certain things, I could *sense* the color in my mind. It was never distracting; in fact, it often helped me remember things, like how many sheepskins I'd last seen in the barn.

All that changed when I went to see where the star struck near the base of Chomolungma, Mother of the World, which visitors call Mount Everest. The night before, we all had seen it streaking through the sky, its tail redder than the War God's skin. Everyone was curious, of course, but some people in our village refused to go see what had fallen—the old-timers in particular said that if it had been cast out of Heaven, it was not for man to look upon. Those of us who would go went anyway, laughing at them, and at their children, sour-faced and resentful at being kept at home.

The crater was smoking like a cup of *su cha* on a cold morning when we came upon it, but in spite of all the dead trees and blackened stones the earth was not too warm to walk on. Still, the strangeness of it put off many of our party, and they stood well away from the lip of the depression.

Something did seem wrong… it was the shadows, as if the sun shone differently upon that place than elsewhere. My sister begged me not to go nearer, and many agreed we should turn around. I would not listen, and went to see, walking over the hot earth until at last I saw what lay at the center. It was a rough, vaguely spherical stone not much smaller than a wagon-wheel. I approached the steaming boulder, and saw a long fissure ran along it.

I am not sure what I thought I might see if I gazed into its depths, but gaze I did. What lurked within was of such a strange nature! I would call it a color… but it was not a color I knew.

No one else looked within, in part because I am told once I saw this sight I uttered a wordless cry and staggered back before collapsing. And the next day, when others from our village went to inspect the place, the object, and whatever had lurked within it, had unaccountably disappeared.

This was all told to me afterwards; I lay unconscious for nearly a week. And when I awoke, I found that either I or the world had changed. Whatever it was, color or something else, I had been blinded by it, in part. I still saw, but from that day forth I no longer felt the blue-green comfort of the number nine, or knew the crimson warmth of the sound of cattle lowing.

It had also taken my voice from me. I could not say a word after waking from that strange, dreamless slumber. Before I got used to silence, I would try, only to become so overwhelmed with the memory of what I had seen that it seemed to me the world spun faster under my feet, and I was in danger of falling off it. I quickly trained myself to not speak—or think about speaking, and not long after that, I found I would rather keep silent… for I discovered that seeing what I had seen had not only taken something from me, but given me something in return.

I first noticed it when grandmother passed me my plate of *dal*

bhat one night. Her hand shook in a strange way, spilling the hot lentils on my lap. Later, when I was resentfully scrubbing out my *chhuba*, I thought about her, and how the color, *that* color, had infused the memory, clinging to her as a butterfly clings to a flower in a stiff wind. I did not understand the significance, but as long as I thought of her, the color was there.

A day later, a spasm shook her. She messed herself, and then she started making a sound halfway between a groan and a cry. There was nothing anyone could do. She wailed and grunted all night. When the dawn broke, she finally stopped, but it was because she had died.

For a time, I worried *I* had killed her. I carried the weight of it like a faggot of wood until I saw the color again, in my mind, when my father's brother by marriage went to another village to trade, and stayed away longer than expected. A day later, a party was sent out to find him, only to discover he had been crushed beneath a falling tree while camping for the night. It was not clear when the accident had occurred, but I thought it unlikely I had caused it.

Just the same, I felt no relief, for I knew then the awful truth about what it meant to see that color in my mind. It was a terrible thing, live among those I loved, knowing when they must die.

When Dr. Sangare and Bridget arrived in our village, asking for a guide to Leng, it surprised my family when I volunteered to escort the two strange women to that dangerous land from whence few ever returned. I helped them to understand as best I could that I *wanted* to go—made the point that my knowledge of English would be a boon to their little expedition. In the end, they accepted my gestured explanations, and let me go, though reluctantly.

For the first time since I was struck dumb I was grateful that I could not communicate the truth. How could I explain that I would rather focus my attention on those whom I did not care if they died?

§

The expedition started off well enough. Dr. Sangare and Bridget were excellent travelers, willing to wake up early, help fix meals,

and best of all, they kept to a reasonable pace and therefore never suffered from the altitude or the distance. They had packed more than necessary, but everyone always does; I knew that from hearing my cousins talk about guiding hikers. But my companions hadn't taken all that much more than they needed, and they always carried some of their own gear.

They were kind and friendly, always making sure I was eating and drinking enough, and never making fun of me when they did something I found bizarre, or vice versa. I knew that trekkers were often rude to their guides, so I felt lucky. It made the journey much more enjoyable than I expected.

They knew about me only what the other English-speakers in my village had told them—that I had learned English from a monk who had come to our monastery all the way from Kathmandu, that I had often trekked through the Himalayas, and knew the pass that would take them through to Leng. They told me similarly little of themselves, but I put together a kind of history from their conversations, so I knew that Dr. Sangare had traveled to England from a country called Mali in order to study medicine. But, as women were not allowed at the university, she had learned to dress and act like an Englishman in order to earn her degree, and liked it so much she retained her suits even after she left.

Or rather, was asked to leave. After only a year. Pretending to be a man had gotten her in the door, but she could not pretend away the color of her skin. The other students had made life difficult for her, stealing her books, humiliating her in class, preventing her from accessing the various laboratories open to the student doctors. In order to get enough experience in dissecting corpses she'd ended up needing to exhume her own. When she was caught, instead of seeing her dedication for what it was, her college had shown her the door. Dr. Sangare was of the opinion they'd been only too glad to see the back of her; almost grateful to her for giving them a reason to do so, so early in her career.

Bridget was possessed of as checkered a past. She had had many trades, most of them involving some degree of law-breaking, and was possessed of many skills, the majority of them illegal. She

was a survivor, cunning and wise, but kind and cheerful too.

Dr. Sangare had opened an unlicensed women's clinic after being dismissed, helping working women with illnesses picked up in any number of common ways, as well as providing family planning services. It was there that she'd met Bridget, and while one was dark and the other fair, one educated and one world-wise, each had seen herself in the other.

The capital Dr. Sangare used to open her clinic had come largely from the sale of certain personal effects she had claimed from those bodies she had procured while still in medical school. Unfortunately, given her chosen clientele's lack of solvency, she didn't make enough to keep herself in medicine and meals and to also bribe the lawmakers into looking the other way when they realized what she was doing.

Bridget stuck by Dr. Sangare even after the scandal, offering her a place to stay when her clinic was shut down and her assets were all seized. While living together they discussed the sensational news regarding a Dr. Carter's recent expedition to Egypt—as well as the estimated value of what he had discovered. Dr. Sangare knew how to rob a grave, and Bridget knew how to get by on not a lot, even in unfamiliar places, so they decided almost that very night to try something similar. The pockets of the unwary and the graves of the damned supplied everything they needed to get to someplace with deeper pockets and more fabulous graves. And in order to make the most from their efforts, they decided that they would keep the expedition to just the two of them.

How they settled on Leng I never did find out. All I heard was that they had "obtained" a map allegedly showing the burial valley of Leng's ancient warrior queens; after we made it over the pass, it was toward this we headed. I was never as convinced of its existence as they were, but I hoped it was real. Though I was appalled by Dr. Sangare's grave-robbing, and alarmed by Bridget's nonchalance about having been a hired killer, thief, and prostitute at various times in her life, I came to respect them both for their determination and passion. I came to like them.

I like to think they came to respect me and like me, too.

§

I awaken, tasting dirt and blood. I spit out a tooth, which bounces away and disappears. It is *black* down in the pit; I see nothing but a patch of sky through the hole we tumbled through.

I feel around in the darkness, and cut myself before discovering our lantern, shattered in the fall. Were I able, I'd curse, for the hot gush between my thumb and forefinger makes me aware of the sticky blood on my face, in my eyes; the scrapes all over my body.

I find some bit of ragged cloth and wrap my hand, which makes it easier to get one of our emergency candles lit. The brightness sets my eyes watering, but eventually I can see enough to look around.

We are in a conical cave. Cobwebs cling to everything, and the floor is littered with dusty chunks of masonry. The most interesting thing is the staircase, spiraling to the hole above along the side of the structure. I frown at it, as I feel my aches and pains from the fall.

My two companions are slumped on the floor. I trot over to them. They are both breathing, but Bridget's arm is twisted under her body in a way that sets my stomach rolling. She will need medical attention. Fortunately, there's a doctor close at hand.

I drizzle some of our precious water onto Dr. Sangare's face, getting a little in her mouth. She sputters and licks her lips, then gingerly pushes herself to a seated position.

"Krishna!" She looks around. "Are we safe?"

I nod.

"How did you get down here?"

I point skyward.

"You jumped?" She seems annoyed. "Now we're all stuck!"

I point at the stairs. Her eyes widen.

"You knew?"

I shook my head.

"What a damn fool thing to do!"

I raise an eyebrow, folding my arms over my chest. She sighs.

"What I mean is *thank you*." She winces, stretching out her legs. The knee of her trouser has been ripped away, and her black flesh

beneath is red and pink with blood. “At the very least we’re safe from those jackals in here.”

I point at Bridget. Dr. Sangare gasps, and pulls herself over to her partner.

“She’s still out cold! We need to get her up.”

I pour water into Bridget’s mouth. She does not stir.

Dr. Sangare frowns. She looks worried. I am not. If Bridget were in real danger, I’d know.

“Bridget!” She shakes the girl. “Come on!”

“Gngh,” says Bridget, eyelids flickering. “Ow.”

We get her up, and take a look at her arm. It is definitely broken.

“We’ll have to set it,” Dr. Sangare says, frown deepening.

I can see how much pain Bridget is in already, and hold up a single finger. While they watch, mystified, I pack a *chillum* with hash. I pantomime how to smoke.

“What…” Bridget winces. “I suppose I can’t ask why.”

I consider this and point to my arm, making a wracked expression, as if I’m in pain.

“I see.” She looks to Dr. Sangare, who shrugs. “Well, I suppose I’ll try it…”

I help her get the pipe lit off the candle, and encourage her as she hacks and coughs on the thick smoke. When we see the relaxation on her face, we know it’s time.

Dr. Sangare puts her belt between Bridget’s teeth, a wise precaution. It is my job to hold her as Dr. Sangare sets the bone. She screams, but recovers quickly, as Dr. Sangare splints the arm and then constructs a makeshift sling from a scarf. When she’s finished, I pass out some goat jerky.

“Well, that’s done,” mumbles Bridget, through a mouthful, “but even if the jackals are gone, I’m afraid I’ll need to rest a bit.”

“I suppose I’ll do some exploring,” says Dr. Sangare, finishing her portion with one enormous bite. “This place must have been made by people for some purpose. Let’s see if they left anything behind.”

She grabs a piece of firewood and makes a torch of it, tearing Bridget’s petticoat into strips to wrap around one end and dousing it

all in the last of our lamp oil. Bridget giggles, watching this, but I make the concerned Dr. Sangare understand that this is normal, a side effect of the hash.

Dr. Sangare begins to wave her torch about. We see there is a cavernous door in the wall; a corridor that slopes downward. We must be beneath ground level, but we can go yet deeper.

She looks from the door to me. "Krishna—want to come?"

I look from Dr. Sangare to Bridget. The girl nods.

"I'll be fine," she says vaguely, helping herself to more jerky.

Before I go, I wrap the remainder and tuck it out of sight. If the hunger comes on her, as it can with hash sometimes, I don't want her eating everything we have left.

The ceiling is much lower in the tunnel. Dr. Sangare and I pad along, her hunched over; me upright with my head only a few inches from the rock, winding our way deeper as we go. Our path is a spiral, curving in on itself, a continuation of the staircase leading out of the conical chamber above. I see Dr. Sangare checking her pocket watch every so often. She's timing our descent. It occurs to me that this is a woman used to sneaking around in unfamiliar places.

In unfamiliar graves.

"I wonder what this place is," she mutters. "It wasn't on our map…"

I cannot muse with her, but having looked at that map, which had only the vaguest markings, I am hardly surprised it left a few things off.

Eventually the tunnel bottoms out. A low gate has been built into the living rock, two stone slabs topped with a third. There is a chamber beyond the portal, and Dr. Sangare immediately squats down, thrusting the torch within and peering about.

I am more concerned by the hideous carving of a jackal-headed monster that sits atop the portal. Wings curve from its shoulder blades and teeth from its maw. It is hideous, sinister, and Dr. Sangare's torchlight glints off the polished stones of its eyes in a way that makes it look almost alive.

I find it strange that no door blocks our passage. There is only

this silent stone guardian protecting what lies within. I note there is some kind of writing carved at its cruel feet.

"Coming?" asks Dr. Sangare. She seems excited.

I point to the statue; the unfamiliar script. Dr. Sangare shrugs impatiently.

"There's gold in there," she says, and darts inside.

I consider whether I will go in after her, and that's when I see it. *The color*. Like the halo of flames surrounding the glorious goddess Palden Lhamo, the color is all around Dr. Sangare in my mind's eye. I cannot say anything, and when I think about trying the blackness appears behind my eyes with that telltale sensation of faintness.

Something about this place has doomed her. She does not know it, but I do.

I dart inside after her. Perhaps it isn't too late.

Once I'm through, I can't think of the color in my mind, for I am overwhelmed with all the very real gold. It limns the cave and every object in it, red-gold and yellow-gold and orange-gold, depending on where Dr. Sangare's torch is burning. She is running to and fro, staring at everything, mouth open.

"Krishna!" she calls. Her voice is pitched higher than usual. "This is it! Look at it all!"

I am looking. Heaps of coins, diadems, bangles, cloth of gold, gold and jewel-encrusted weapons, even mirrors, the golden backing riming the reflective glass like early ice along the edges of a frozen puddle. It is a queen's barrow, such as my companions dreamed of finding.

Dr. Sangare whoops and sings, racing from one pile to the next, selecting baubles and shoving handfuls of coins in her pockets. I sit back, dismayed, wondering what here could spell her doom. Is there a trap? A curse? Everything and nothing seems possible in that glimmering grave.

She slings a heavy chain of gold links around my neck before I can stop her. "Very handsome!" she hoots, before going deeper to see what else she can see.

I am still squatting near the entrance when I hear, "*Krishna*!" I lope quickly after her, worried, but when I find her amid the

splendor I see that she is excited, not upset. She has found the queen —or at least a queenly-looking skeleton, perched upon a throne. She holds a sword in one hand, and some sort of idol in the other. The weight of a heavy crown has caused her clean white skull to list forward.

The crown comes to two strange points. They look like long ears.

"I want it." Dr. Sangare is transfixed not by the crown or the sword but by the golden object clutched in the queen's left hand. It is a miniature version of the guardian I saw above the tomb's entrance. "Hold this," she says, thrusting the torch into my hands.

The color in my mind is brighter than ever, and I realize the idol is the source of the danger. I pluck at her tweed sleeve, urging her to leave it be, come away.

"What?" she asks, annoyed.

I point at the statuette and shake my head. She rolls her eyes. I tighten my grasp on her wrist. I shake my head again. I wish I could tell her something, anything, but I cannot, so I do not.

"Don't be so superstitious," she snaps, wresting herself free.

I step back. I have never heard a tone like that in her voice. It frightens me. I point at it, and her, but I know not how to tell her without words that the gilded thing means death.

"I didn't hire you to lecture me," she says, turning back to the idol. She lifts it gingerly enough, but the skeleton comes unbalanced once the weight is gone and falls forward with a rattle of dry bones. The head bows, the sword clatters to the ground in a puff of dust, and the free hand jerks forward.

A finger points directly at Dr. Sangare.

She takes no notice; she is too entranced by her find, the tiny model of a winged snarling jackal now cradled in her hands. She leans in to the torchlight, studying its intricate details.

"Bridget," she breathes, "oh, Bridget… don't you worry. We'll die rich, yes we fucking will."

I resist the urge to knock it out of her hands, cast the thing away. What good would it do? She is resolved upon having it, was resolved before she even picked it up. I see it in her eyes, and in her

posture. The way she touches it.

"Just think of what the British Museum will pay for it." She grins at me. "Eat your heart out, Lawrence of Arabia! Dily of Leng is about to eclipse your fame!"

I carry an armful of riches back up the spiraling corridor, but my heart is heavier than the gold. I can share none of their joy over the find, though I know it is extraordinary.

They do not notice my mood. They are too busy delighting in their fortune. Dr. Sangare shows it all to Bridget, piece by piece. I notice she gives every item to her partner to fondle, save for the idol. That, she holds before Bridget's eyes, keeping it in her own hands.

"How much can we carry back, is the question?"

Bridget and Dr. Sangare look over at me.

"Krishna, what do you think?"

What I think and what I can communicate are two very different things. I look at their gear, and think about the volume of gold below our feet. Assuming they are willing to leave behind everything that is not essential to our survival, I imagine I can carry back quite a bit of splendid treasure.

In order to get this across, I rummage through a bag. I find Dr. Sangare's favorite teacup and Bridget's two spare corsets. I show them to my companions, mystifying them, and then set them away from the pile of gold. I point to one, then the other, and shake my head.

"We'll have to downsize." Bridget gets it first. "Of course! I can help with that, while you and Dily pick out the choicest keepsakes." She sighs. "I see now why expeditions always have a dozen or more people, camels, horses, carts… too bad we couldn't afford all that, eh Dily?"

"Next time," she says.

Dr. Sangare and I spend the next few hours down in the queen's vault. I do not fail to notice the bulge in her coat pocket as she sifts through the treasure. She did not leave the idol above; it is with her, with *us*, in the cave. I wonder if she put it down if the color would retreat from my mind, but I have little hope of this. Dr. Sangare's hand finds the object often, checking to make sure it is there as she

selects other items of varying size and varying value.

I am flattered by how strong she must think me, but eventually I must protest, when the pile grows to unreasonable proportions.

"What?"

I make a motion that I hope conveys my desire that she stop. She gets it after a moment, and sighs.

"All right," she says wistfully. "But I can carry some too, you know."

I glance at the heap of treasure. It is more than three men could carry comfortably, and while Dr. Sangare is strong, Bridget has never been particularly robust, and now she has a broken arm. But, I know it will be easier to object when she realizes she may risk tearing the canvas of our pack and taking nothing back at all.

Even with her broken arm, Bridget has not been idle. She has significantly reduced their gear. I return a few crucial items, and then set to loading our spoils.

"Let's eat and go," says Dr. Sangare, eyeing the stairs and the patch of light above. "I want to be out of this hole."

"All right," says Bridget. "I suppose there's no advantage to waiting around."

There is, but I cannot explain they should sleep, that both look vaguely maniacal after all the excitement. I just pack, and pack, and pack, occasionally checking the weight and then packing more.

When I feel I have loaded the bag sufficiently, I alert my companions. Bridget has been dozing, but Dr. Sangare is awake, staring at the winged jackal, watching it as if it might fly away at any moment.

"No room at the inn?" asks Dr. Sangare, pointing at the remainder.

I have no idea what she means, not really, but I shake my head.

"Ah well, it can't be helped," she says, hefting the bag. Her eyes widen. "You've packed it so heavy I'll be amazed if you can make it down from here, much less carry it back to some place where we can hire a cart. You sure this is all right?"

I nod.

"You never fail to impress, Krishna," she says.

I smile, but it feels strained. The color is still around her, and I cannot feel like a triumphant adventurer with that hanging over me.

I follow Dr. Sangare and Bridget up the curving steps to the top of the cave. They are in a fabulous mood, and agree there is no way the jackals will have lingered as long as we were unconscious. I have no idea how long we were really out, but I too hope it was long enough for the pack to lose interest and hunt some other game.

It appears so. We are the only living things to be seen on that windswept, forgotten plateau when we emerge, save for a few bees buzzing in the tall grasses.

"Can I help you? Do you need help getting down?" Dr. Sangare is already halfway down from the top of the rock spire, but Bridget remains with me. "I know I only have one arm, but…"

I smile; shake my head no. I am touched that in her condition she would think of me, but I am more worried for her than for myself.

She takes it slowly, and is able to clamber down without incident. Afternoon fades to evening as we descend.

Dr. Sangare waits for us near the bottom, sitting cross-legged on a boulder.

"All right!" she says brightly. "Time to go home!"

I step off the rock. My feet sink into the springy turf, going deeper than normal due to the weight on my back.

"Home," says Bridget. "Fancy that. And far sooner than we expected!"

I help her down beside me, and she favors me with a smile.

"I like this buttered *cha* we've been getting," says Dr. Sangare as she jumps down beside us, "but a cup of builder's tea sounds like—"

A distant rumble as her feet touch the ground stills her tongue. At first I think it is thunder, but then the rumbling grows louder, and louder, and the rock spire begins to shake. I back away quickly, and my companions follow me as the structure collapses in on itself with a tremendous roar of stone pounding stone; earth falling onto earth.

We watch in shock, getting dust and dirt in our open mouths. When it is over, Dr. Sangare spits, rubs her eyes and whistles.

"Glad we took so much with us," she says.

Bridget gawps at her. "We almost died," she exclaims.

"I thought you didn't want to die poor." Dr. Sangare grins at her.

"No, but—"

This time, it is a howl that interrupts their banter. It appears we are not the only ones who noticed the disturbance on the plateau.

"Where are they?" asks Bridget, glancing about. "Where's it coming from?"

Dr. Sangare looks to me, as if I might have an answer. I shrug. The wind makes it difficult to tell. We wait, tense, and watch.

The first black shape on the horizon answers the question. Bridget spies them first, points. Dr. Sangare draws her knives.

"You want to make a stand?" she asks.

"Where can we run?" is Dr. Sangare's answer. I see her point, dump my pack, and draw my *khukuri*. Bridget already has her pistol in hand.

It seems like there are more of them than before as they bound closer to us, their shadows long in the fading light. The jackals fan out and surround us, circling us as we stand back to back, the pack with all our loot at the center of our triad. They snarl and growl and snap, some even dart in momentarily to see if we will break and allow ourselves to be swarmed. I am frightened for the first time, for I never can tell when a person will die once the color touches them, and I do not know whether my talent extends to myself. Bridget seems safe, for now, so perhaps this is not the end for us. I cannot imagine how she alone would escape.

The dogs circle us. Up close, I see their pelts are ragged; their bones show through the skin. Starvation makes them vicious.

"Flea-bitten mutts," hisses Dr. Sangare. "Come closer, I dare you!"

"They have no reason to keep back," says Bridget, her mind whirling. "They're waiting for something."

"They're waiting for us to flinch," says Dr. Sangare. "They want an opening."

"Do we give them what they want?"

"I think it's time. I'll fire a shot into one, see what they do."

I clutch my *khukuri* a little tighter as the rapport echoes across the plateau. A howl is cut short, and then they mob us.

My *khukuri* is sharp, and I know how to use it. I slice downwards across the throat of the first jackal that springs at me, and the blade glints red in the last of the light. As the jackal falls dead, another leaps; I kick the first away and raise my knife again, this time chopping straight down through the skull of the beast.

As I jerk the blade out of its brains, two come at me. I drop low, use the pommel to stick one in the eye and then bring it back around to stab the other. I get it in the side, and it takes a second strike to finish it off. By the time I'm done the first has bitten me on the calf and is worrying at the meat there. I yelp but keep my head and stab it in the side of the neck. Its jaws tighten as it dies, and I fall back, coming down hard on my ass as the beast shits itself in its death throes.

I crane my neck see how my companions fare. Bridget has felled a pile of them with her pistol but is now frantically trying to reload in the twilight, standing behind Dr. Sangare, who is holding her own with her two knives, their long straight blades dripping wet. As ferocious as we three are, there are more of them than there are of us, and I fear for our survival even as I avoid trying to see if Bridget now falls here.

"Got that bang-stick reloaded yet?" asks Dr. Sangare, stumbling back after kicking away the corpse of another jackal.

"Not quite," says Bridget. "Sorry, I just need a bit more time!"

Time is what we don't have. I turn back to see more jackals approaching, three this time. I cannot stand, my bitten leg buckles under me when I try, so from a crouch I use one leg to propel myself at one. I stumble, off balance, so the slash of my knife takes its ear off, and cuts another on the bridge of the nose. This just makes them mad, and they shake off the pain to lunge at me. Sensing the third has gotten behind me I roll out of the way. Two collide with one another, but the third jumps over them and is on me. Its heavy paws pin my arms, it slavers in my face, teeth inches from my nose.

Then it is off me, jumping high in the air like a startled cat. I sit

up, knife in hand, but it is slinking away, tail between its legs. They all are—the bloodied and the whole are drawing together, bristling but submissive. I get unsteadily to my feet and hop to Bridget and Dr. Sangare, who are bitten and scratched, but alive.

"Something's spooked them," says Dr. Sangare. "They would have overwhelmed us, why…"

A sound makes us turn to the rock pile, where a shadow looms, dark against the darkening sky. Slowly it pulls itself from the rubble like some awful newborn crawling from its dead mother, and even though I can see the moon through its hazy form it seems heavy, weighted, misshapen.

"What the hell is that?" breathes Bridget, as transfixed as I.

I have no answers until the lumpy mass that appears to be its back bubbles and writhes, unfurling into two great wings.

I am not the only one that recognizes it.

"*Run!*" shouts Dr. Sangare, as she turns and takes off. Bridget follows, slower, but slowest of all am I, limping behind with my injured leg dragging through the grass. Where they are headed I cannot say. They are not thinking those kinds of thoughts. They are only eager to be gone, and I cannot blame them.

Unlike the last time we were all running together, Dr. Sangare says nothing to encourage Bridget; does not look back at me. She is fleeing from the horrible looming thing. She does not seem to think its ephemeral nature will make it any less dangerous. Neither do I—my *khukuri* cannot cut smoke and shadow.

"Dily!" calls Bridget. She is struggling, the jolting of her broken forearm is taking its toll, but Dr. Sangare is not listening. She only slows momentarily when the idol falls out of her coat pocket, bouncing several times and rolling to a stop, gleaming bright in the grass. Turning on her heel, she looks at it only a moment before leaving it there.

In my mind, the color does not leave her. She is still marked for death, and as I hear a terrible flapping behind us, I sense it will come from claws as sharp as they are insubstantial.

Bridget does not have to turn back to retrieve the cursed thing. She reaches; I see the color. Her hand draws closer. I am too far

behind her to stop her. Time seems to slow; before her fingertips brush the gold I see the color brightening, resolving, spreading over her. I muster my courage, and though my vision begins to swim and the colors of that twilit field grow duller I shout at her not to touch the cursed thing. I cannot sit by a second time, let it happen again.

Her fingers close on it as the beating of wings grows louder.

§

When I wake, it is night. The moon hangs huge and low above me. The first thing I feel is astonishment that I am alive. The next thing I feel is pain, all over, in my arms and legs and chest, and especially in my calf, where the jackal bit me.

I sit up, carefully, and look around. It is quiet. No shadow looms anywhere, winged and terrible.

A crumpled thing lies in the grass several yards from me. I drag myself over and see it is Bridget. She is dead, torn to pieces. The golden jackal is nowhere to be seen. I apologize to her, in my mind, for not being braver sooner. Tears roll down my cheeks as I pray she will pass quickly through the *bardo* and be reborn.

As I cry, I hear a sound, and I see a second figure lying in the grass. I pull myself away and limp over to find Dr. Sangare. She is no better off—worse, really, because she is still alive and clearly in great pain. She too has been torn and worried by whatever came for the idol.

She looks up at me, and smiles.

"You were right," she says. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head. I do not want an apology. It is I who should apologize—if I had mustered the courage to speak before she touched it the first time, perhaps we would not be here.

"Krishna…" she coughs. "I'm in so much pain. I know we asked you to bear so many of our burdens. Can I ask you to carry one more?"

I have never killed, never wanted to kill, but I know it would be a kindness to oblige her.

I know too that it was not the idol, nor the demon thing we saw

that was destined to kill Dr. Sangare. It was me. I damned her with my inability to speak… or was it unwillingness? For the fear of a few moments' dizziness I failed to say what needed to be said, and that knowledge feels heavier than the pack I bore to Leng, the gold in the tomb… even the task that now falls to me.

I push these questions away. There is work to be done.

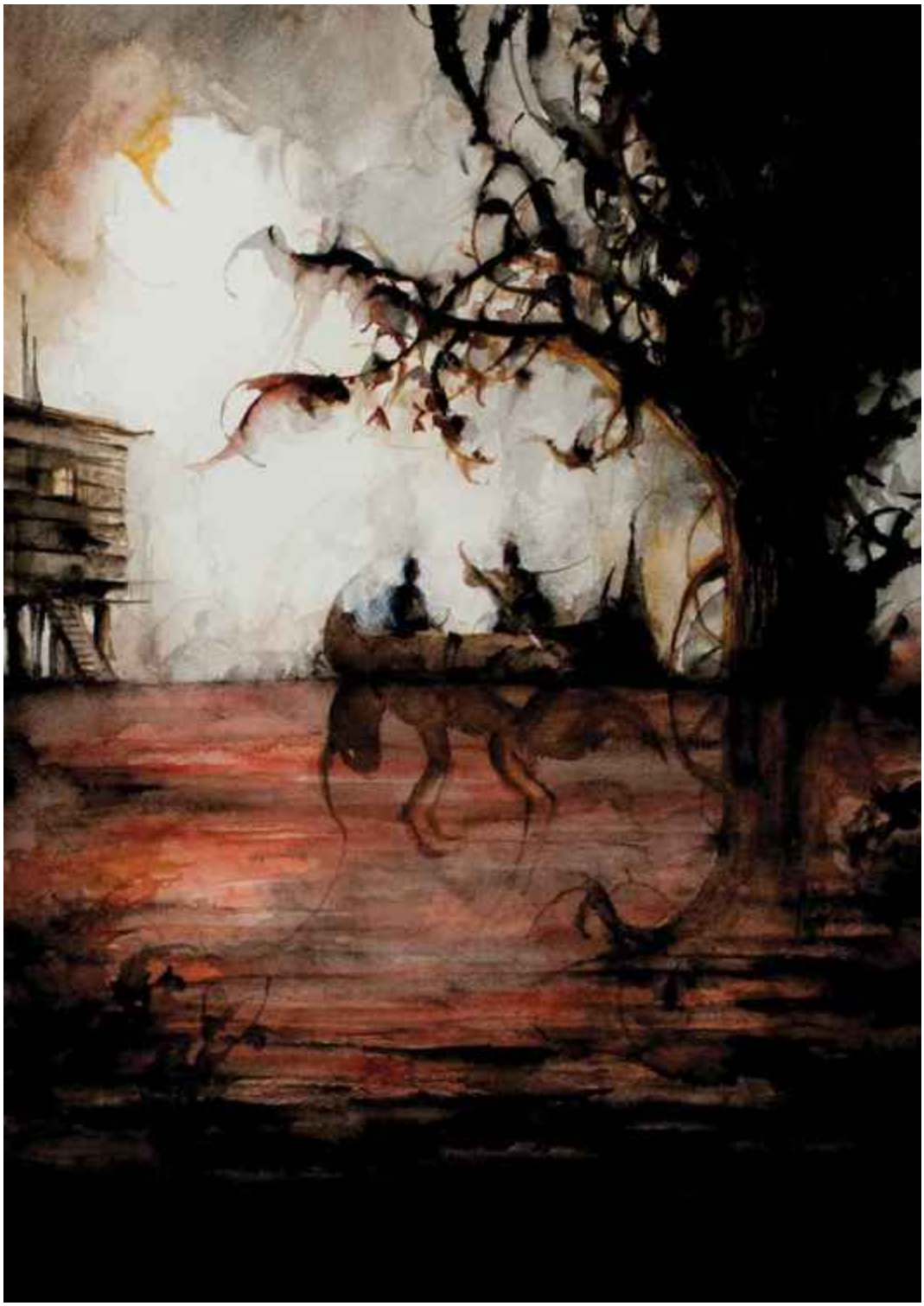
I smile at her, trying to apologize without words, and unsheathe my *khukuri*.

Cthulhu's Mother

Kelda Crich

Knock on door. Door opens
MOTHER: No, thank you. We never give at the door.
LENG PRIEST: We are here to honor dread Cthulhu.
MOTHER: Cthulhu? He's still in bed.
LENG PRIEST: Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.
MOTHER: Beg pardon?
LENG PRIEST: In his house at R'lyeh, dread Cthulhu waits dreaming.
C'TTAR: Oh, the dreams! The terrible, terrible dreams. I have glimpsed creatures vast beyond imagination stalk the primordial forests. I have walked monstrous cities of cyclopean stones. His dreams consume me.
MOTHER: Yes. The dreams are no joke, are they? At least you don't have to wash his sheets.
TERRY: That is not dead which can eternal lie. And with strange eons even death may die.
MOTHER: Oh, friend of Abdul's, are you? Nice boy, Abdul. How is he?
LENG PRIEST: He died in gibbering madness. But we have read his prophecies in the sacred Necromonicon.
MOTHER: That's nice, dear. Cthulhu! Cthulhu! Will you get out of that pit. Your minions are here. He'll be up in a tick.
LENG PRIEST: Madam, I am no minion. I am the Leng Lord who has waited for Cthulhu, these centuries past. Since before earth formed, since before our race was conceived, in the formless void, I awaited him. This is my acolyte, C'ttar, the sacred dreamer.
C'TTAR: Pleased to meet you.
TERRY: And I'm not official, as such. But I was passing and saw the island. And thought "hello." I've read all of Cthulhu's books. I'm a

big fan.
MOTHER: Books?
TERRY: H.P.
MOTHER: Sauce?
TERRY: Lovecraft.
LENG PRIEST: You are his acolyte, madam?
MOTHER: Ha. No. I'm his mother.
LENG PRIEST: But your form is human.
MOTHER: Only on the outside, dear. When the island emerged I thought it would be nice to stretch my legs a bit. I went to Ikea. So many wandering lost souls. Such a lovely temple to existential angst. Well done on that. *_pause_* Where is that boy? Cthulhu! Cthulhu! It's so nice of you to pop round. He doesn't have many friends. And you've got one of his stones, I see.
LENG PRIEST: His sacred image, passed from the dawn of time.
MOTHER: If you like it, I've got dozens in the yard. Help yourself. It would free up a bit of space for me. Although I suppose I'll have a whole world to revel in soon enough. It will make a nice change. *_pause_* Well, I'm just going to have to go down there and get him.
Sound of footsteps, descending.
C'TTAR: Nobody said anything about a mother.
TERRY: Makes you think, eh?
LENG PRIEST: Women aren't usually part of the mythos. Except as virgin sacrifices, of course.
Sound of footsteps, ascending.
MOTHER: I just can't rouse him. He keeps murmuring "just five more."
LENG PRIEST: Minutes?
MOTHER: Millennia, more like, knowing Cthulhu.
LENG PRIEST: But we have waited strange eons for his return. The stars are aligned.
MOTHER: Well, it would be a shame to disappoint you. Just let me get changed and we'll see if we can't get this apocalypse started. Maybe I'll do a little spawning. I'll shut the door, to keep the draft out, eh?
Door closes.



All Gods Great and Small

Karen Heuler

"What is the size of a god?" McClellan asked, his hand firmly on his scotch, one leg behind him. He stood in John Bream's house, a thing of palmwood and thatch, answering Bream's current refrain that he was damned by the gods in all things. Bream was a failure up north, forced farther and farther south as his various projects resulted in more loss than gain, more humiliation than triumph. He was in Ecuador now, where bribes were cheap and land plentiful. Unfortunately, the land held trees and vines and ants and natives, all of which had to be removed before his properties could be made profitable.

"The size of a god?" Bream laughed contemptuously. He liked to make expansive gestures and he liked to seem smarter than his friends. "Gods are large, of course. If they were small it wouldn't matter to anyone at all."

"I think they might be small," McClellan continued, musing. "Aren't we more at risk of underestimating them if they're small?"

Bream looked at the man sharply. He had only met him a month earlier, at the market in the nearest village. A fellow white man. What was he, though, some kind of fanatic? "Are you a preacher or something?" he asked. "Nobody really talks about gods."

"Hardly," McClellan said, setting his scotch down next to an ant, which he brushed away. "I'm just a curious man following his own curiosity. I've always been interested in cultures and beliefs, and I have a small inheritance so I can do as I please. I heard, years ago, rumors about an old religion here, geared to insects, and started learning the language. But they speak an old dialect, so I've been making my way solely by picking up what I can."

"Insect religions?" Bream said in disgust. His skin crawled at the thought of it.

"Old religions are often animistic," McClellan said easily. "And

why not insects? They're everywhere. They're older than we are. I believe cockroaches predate dinosaurs. The first creatures on the land were insects. They have a remarkable capacity to survive, if you think about it. Older than we are." His voice was a little thrilled.

Bream scowled. He was stuck with McClellan, if he wanted to have any kind of intelligent conversation. The natives seemed to speak no English or else they just had a habit of staring at him, even the women. Especially the women; he wasn't used to that. There was a disturbing sense that nothing was in its rightful place here.

McClellan accepted everything about this hellish place with interest, even the maddening ants. They could very well be a god of some kind, Bream thought, a nasty god, the kind of thing these staring natives conjured up to rid themselves of men like him. The incessant rain was maddening, but the ants were even worse. They came in black and brown and red and some were half one color and half another. They bit and they stung.

McClellan seemed impervious to the rain and to the ants. He was a red-haired man whose skin flaked off when the sun was out, hanging in strips off his face like cobwebs, whose eyes had brightened when the first rains finally came. According to McClellan, the ants had no choice but to march incessantly around the house. There was very little dry land, after all. The rivers had swelled and covered the earth. The house had been built on stilts to anticipate the height of the water, and the ants had to go somewhere.

Bream had come from a drier land, a land with grass and slopes and trees that stood respectfully back. During the dry season he had burned down acres of trees to make a clearing around his house, and he claimed land along the river and was intent on burning down acres and acres of forest, since he wanted to raise grains or cattle. But he wasn't a good farmer; he couldn't accept that there would always be flooding that would imperil his crops. Sometimes he burned trees simply because he couldn't see anything but trees and vines and more trees and vines. He wanted an open prospect.

It was impossible to see any distance in the rains. He had burned down the trees around him and planted grass seed sent from the north, but the grasses drowned as the river rose. He had the

natives rope balsam saplings together so he could lay down dirt on them and seed them and have them float with the floods. If a man wanted a lawn, then he should have a lawn. In the wetness his house began to grow vines and leaves and he could hear the planks and walls move at night, sending out roots that clutched at chairs and tables. His dishes were covered in green slime, which returned mere minutes after being washed and wiped dry. Wiped dry? Nothing was dry. Even the innermost rooms began to drip moisture, tears that gathered and slid down every surface. The imported rugs were sponges that rotted and then kept wet; he left indented footprints where he walked.

Recently, an Indian had come by in a canoe and offered him freshly killed meats, but Bream thought he saw a glint of gold rock in the bottom of the canoe and he pointed to that instead. The Indian shook his head no. Bream couldn't understand what he was saying, and McClellan wasn't around. Finally, as the Indian started to push off, Bream drew his gun out of frustration and shot him in the hand. He had meant it only as a warning, and it was merely an accident. He had wanted the rock and information about it. If there was gold here, he meant to get it. He was more used to shooting now; he would not make that mistake again. His patience was waning, though McClellan said he must have been wrong about the gold leaves. He said the gold was in the mountains.

McClellan had a way of saying things, blandly but somehow pointed. Still, he was often right, and he spoke quite a lot of the native language. He was irritating but useful.

The rain, on the other hand, was irritating beyond measure. The constant wet made his hands swell. He looked at his fingers one day and saw he had no fingerprints, just plump digits like grubs. His floating lawn began to rot, the wood on which the grasses were grown threw roots out like mats, with the grasses falling through them, ants crawling on top of them. Always and everywhere: ants.

Bream hired natives whose sole job was to move about the house, killing ants. But the ants were quick, and endless.

Because Bream trusted no one, he insisted that the natives bring him the dead bodies of ants, as proof they were doing their job. He

had seen them himself, bowls of dead ants, which he tossed into the waters to make sure they weren't simply bringing him the same dead ants. McClellan had witnessed this and said, "You know, if you put all the ants in the world on one side of a scale, and humans on the other, I've heard that the ants would outweigh us by a factor of ten. They're everywhere, in the deserts, in the arctic, in the walls of our houses. I don't know if they've only counted the ants on the ground. Did they think about the ones below ground, crawling through their tunnels and their mounds? Quite architectural, those ants. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

Bream grunted. "My thoughts about them are not so philosophical." He began to feel that somehow McClellan wasn't completely on his side; that he kept an entirely too objective interest in what Bream did, and what the natives did, and what the ants did.

Those miserable creatures found Bream every night and bit him. The bites itched and burned and suppurated. He had the servants check his bed each night, pulling off damp sheets, replacing the matting, and still the ants found him. They bit his eyebrows, his ankles, his ears. One night, he felt one bite his eyelid and froze, afraid to open his eyes, picking gently at his eyelid. His fingertips searched for an insect body, but it was too late. It had moved elsewhere. He could almost feel a small burst of insect contempt.

The next day, his eye swollen, he and McClellan enlisted a native to take them to the nearest town of Yaquitos. He would purchase every last rusted can of insecticide the town held. He sat stiffly in the boat as the servant started the small motor. McClellan smoked a cigarette. There was only a small rain, which held steady as they reached their destination.

They walked up and down the long street of Yaquitos, going into the small one-room stores, buying anything Bream could find with a skull and crossbones on it. Half of the spray cans said *insectivo* or the like, but the rest of them were nonspecific. Bream didn't care what he killed. Kill the vines that crept through the house, kill the ants, kill the massive, noisy spiders—kill everything that lived in this infernal place. When the rains ceased, he would tear down, burn down everything that grew. He wanted to see a horizon, he wanted

to look outside and see *distance*. There could be something hiding behind every tree in the Amazon, and no doubt there was—bugs, snakes, natives, big cats, alligators. Ants.

The rain picked up as he added cans of insecticide to the bundle in his backpack. McClellan had a habit of hanging slightly behind him and observing what Bream did. Annoying. A wasp circled around Bream's head and he took a can and sprayed it. They followed the street to the outdoor market beside the river, where Indians sold their Indian goods. McClellan had pointed out that there were two markets, really: one for the town natives and one for the jungle natives. Of course, he hadn't used those terms. But just as there was more than one kind of ant, there was more than one kind of native. Was this a necessary piece of knowledge? Bream doubted it. Still, it amused him to think that one bunch of them was more sophisticated, more "civilized," than the other.

The town market was drenched. The fruits on display were rotting. The bins of fish disclosed obscene distortions, with pink lips and hairy ears. Were they truly fish? Vendors eyed him suspiciously. "What is it with them?" he asked McClellan abruptly.

"Ah," McClellan said, his voice carefully indifferent. "From their point of view, of course, people have vanished since your arrival. Workers, for instance."

"They forget the good I do for them," Bream said. "I give them jobs. I'm providing for their future, too. They would starve without me."

McClellan was silent.

"Of course there are accidents in physical labor," Bream continued with a grunt. "I bet they lose a couple of boys a year when they go out hunting for their meat."

"These particular people eat more fish than meat," McClellan answered. "And the fish have started to look different. They think you're doing something to the water."

"I do nothing to the water," Bream scoffed. "This place is its own kind of hell; I'm not surprised the fish are monstrous. I'm doing my best to improve things around here. Things they're not familiar with. Sanity. Cleanliness. An end to the relentless *jaws* of everything

here, big and small. Blame me because the fish look funny? Blame God or science or civilization itself. Blame the nature of things. I'm merely advancing civilization. They'll thank me someday."

Still, the natives watched him silently with their baskets or tables of goods. Bream decided that silence must be part of the way they did transactions, perhaps to make the buyer uneasy. Bizarre, against natural expectation. They watched him as lizards did, ready to dart away or flick their tongues out.

Up ahead, he saw a kind of alcove formed by huge palm leaves bound together. No doubt it was the jungle native's market. Within it, a half-naked old crone with a thick black band on her upper arm said something menacing as he stopped to inspect her wares—twisted roots, leaves with sharp edges, bones. She had packets shaped from folded leaves as well, holding something. An unspotted orchid with a rotting stench stood up from the strip of bark that formed her rickety table. The orchid's fingerlike white roots gripped the edge of the bark like claws.

"What did she say?" he asked McClellan.

"Something about your insecticide," McClellan answered. "You know you're still holding it, don't you?" He was bemused.

The old woman frowned slightly, and that irritated Bream beyond measure. An ant crawled across his neck and he reached back with two fingers of his free hand and pinched it. He flicked it away. He did not intentionally flick it at the old woman.

She hissed and spoke again. He turned to McClellan, his eyebrows raised. A crack of thunder sounded in the distance.

"She didn't like that, I don't think. Accused you of killing her daughter or something. Of course *daughter* is a kind of generic word around here," he continued. "The trees are daughters, the rivers are daughters, perhaps even the ants are daughters. I wouldn't be surprised. They believe the natural world has rights. Maybe even intelligence. I think they paint spiders for some of the festivals. To amuse them." He grinned. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

It began to rain harder (*ah, had it eased up then*, Bream wondered —*eased up and he hadn't noticed it?*) and there was an eerie silence behind the sound of rain hitting leaves, and natives whispering, and

boats not far away, and bowls and tables—the detritus of daily life. The insects were silent, waiting for some sign that there was a reason to announce themselves. The old woman stared at him fixedly. The rain ran rivulets down her shoulders. Bream swiped at water sourcing down his nose and into his mouth. He had the feeling that everything he did was momentous; maybe it was because everyone was still watching him. He couldn't just turn and leave, because that would have been weakness. He wanted to show them his authority. He wanted to show them he was important.

"Tell her I'll buy all her things," he said abruptly. His first impulse had been to smash all her shabby goods, run them off the table, kick anything in the baskets next to her. But he felt the eyes around him, heard the insect silence, and fell prey to the need to exercise his disdain and his power. This woman, this poor, illiterate Indian, was subject to his whims, good or bad. McClellan was saying something or other in what he imagined was the local patois and her eyes were still on Bream as he swept everything into the bag with the insecticides and then held out money, which she didn't take. He dropped it on the ground in front of her. She pointed to the bag he held and spoke angrily.

"What is it? What's she saying?" Bream asked impatiently.

McClellan had an odd sort of half-grin on his face. He bent and picked up the money again and showed it to Bream. "She said this isn't the right kind of offering. Or gift, maybe. I think you were supposed to give her a gift. She's hard to understand. She has a tough dialect. But I think you might have insulted her."

Bream looked into the woman's face, which was sharp and almost sullen. He felt eyes on him, and he looked around slowly to the other Indians at their stalls—not stalls, really, bunches of items on the ground, small piles of goods. Every native there watched him closely; they didn't avert their eyes when he looked their way.

The woman clicked her tongue once. Bream looked at her then. Her eyes were small and dark and intense, and very steady. It was annoying how those savages felt they could stare at him. He almost had to shake himself, that was how mesmerizing the woman's gaze and the natives' silence was, but he roused himself, turned, walked

over to the river, and threw the bag in.

The air in the market began to thrum with indignation.

McClellan hurried over to him "I think you've done something," he said, surprised. "I think you may have gone too far."

The old woman's anger was palpable and offensive as she shouted out unintelligible words to him. Bream walked back to her, wanting to stand in front of her, just stand there and show her who he was. She should look at him with respect. Instead, she pulled herself stiffly together and held her hand out, pointing at him. To his horror, the armband—or rather, what he'd mistakenly thought was an armband—began to move and break apart in small jostling pieces of some kind. The things raced along her outstretched hand and then jumped off her fingers, straight at him.

Ants. Some made it to him, some fell to the ground and scurried towards him. He stumbled backwards, grabbing the can of insecticide from his pocket, and sprayed.

The market broke into shouts and wails. The old woman stepped back and away while Bream dealt with an onrush of hands grabbing at the insecticide, jabbering madly. The can disappeared into the crowd and then the crowd itself began to gather its things impetuously, bending and swooping over their small wares, collapsing all of it all into small bundles.

McClellan pulled Bream through the crowd as the natives moved off, glancing back over their shoulders, muttering at him in their heathen language. Within minutes, the market was empty.

Bream gave vent to his outrage. "What was that? Who is she? Did you see that? Those ants jumped off her onto me! She can control ants!" He sputtered. "What does she use—did she throw sugar at me, so they would go after it? Are such things allowed here? Barbarians," he muttered, brushing himself down to make sure no insects remained.

McClellan stopped under a tree and turned to him. His usually serene face showed concern. "She's a shaman, a priestess. You shouldn't antagonize her. Even if you don't believe in the gods, then believe in the priests and priestesses. This is their world, their rules. You may have violated a taboo, or made some kind of challenge."

McClellan wiped the rain off his face. "You have to respect what is older and stranger than you."

Bream frowned; he eyed McClellan sideways. "You don't believe this stuff about gods, do you? Little gods?"

McClellan sighed and began to walk towards the river. "It's not about what I believe or you believe. If *they* believe, then it doesn't matter if it's true or not because they'll act as if it is true. And priestesses protect their charges, and people of every belief destroy heretics. So it pays to show respect." He looked around with concern. "We should get away from here as quickly as possible. There's a reason they left, don't you think? Afraid of what would happen next. Didn't you say you wanted to show me your other property? Let's get away from here." They were at the dock, approaching their *panga*, the canoe with the outboard motor that the town Indians used to ferry goods and people around the river settlements. McClellan's voice was clearly anxious; he kept putting his hand on Bream's shoulder to hurry him along.

Bream nodded. That had been the plan; he had wanted to show a white man what he had accomplished so far, and McClellan would have to do, whatever his weird ideas. No other white man had shown up in the months Bream had been here. He glanced at the river, swollen and muddy, almost over its banks. The land in town was higher than his own land—and it irritated him, as if he'd been tricked into it. A slight elevation, and *they* owned it.

He tried to shake off his annoyance. The whole thing had unsettled him. Those ants! How and why would a woman wear ants? In his own land, where a man could be clean and dry, where ants and the uncivilized knew their places, such a thing would be impossible. This climate was ancient and sapped a civilized man's intelligence. And his temper as well.

I want to rip it all up, he thought; *this teeming, massing place. Nothing is ever still here. It is all relentless growing, relentless mouths.*

His thoughts battered him as hard as the rain, which whipped itself into a frenzy once he and McClellan settled into their boat. Lightning ran horizontal, across the tops of the damned trees, sparing them. Had it been up to Bream, the lightning would have

struck every last tree and burned it. Burning trees was necessary, and it gave him pleasure. The land was wasted on trees and vermin. *Burn it all, clear it out, grow crops or beef or anything with value.*

The most immediate irritation, however, was that he was sure McClellan was a fool. McClellan and his interest in tiny gods, his pretense at studying peoples' beliefs. His private income couldn't be much or he would have left as soon as he'd landed. A sensationalist, by all signs. That woman in the market was just an impoverished Indian with primitive magical items. Really, just leaves and flowers though of course leaves did have medicinal purposes here, where real doctors knew better than to roam. Things were out of proportion.

The pilot took them up the river for a while and then the motor slowed down so they could pull into a tributary, which they followed through the heat and the squawking of forest animals—birds, monkeys, frogs and for all he knew or cared, the trees themselves.

He could smell smoke long before they reached the clearing. He scratched at his wrists and picked out an ant from under his fingernails.

"I smell smoke," McClellan said, surprised. The man was slower than he should be.

Bream nodded. "I have them burning trees down, clearing the land."

McClellan pursed his lips. "In this rain? How can you do it in all this rain?"

"I have them pour enough kerosene to get it started."

"That must run off into the river," McClellan said. "No wonder they think you're killing everything."

"I'm not killing everything. I'm clearing land."

They turned a bend in the river and looked at the burning land. Wisps of smoke drifted up from each individual smoldering tree, as if the clouds were forming from them, as if feeding and creating the clouds.

Bream's itching was unendurable. "Why are there so many ants in the boat?" he complained. The Indian who was piloting looked at

him briefly. The man wore only a tattered pair of shorts with not a bite or mark showing. Even McClellan's bare arms looked blotchy from the sun but not from bites. Bream scowled at the burning trees. "They can burn every last tree in the jungle as far as I'm concerned. What do ants eat? Destroy whatever they eat, all of it."

"I think they eat leaves," McClellan said. "Whatever lives in the trees."

"And me," Bream added bitterly. His eyes roamed morosely through the burnt acres and their streamers of smoke. "Look," he said abruptly. "That woman in the market! She's here!"

McClellan looked where he pointed. "I see her," he said sadly.

The men who should be burning more trees were gathering around her. She was higher than they were, Bream could see, standing on a mound. "What is that?" he asked. "What is she standing on?"

"Termite nest," McClellan answered. His voice had gotten a little nervous since they'd seen the witch woman, witch doctor, priestess—Bream didn't care what she called herself, but he *did* care that his workers were putting their cans and lighters down, listening to the witch woman.

"Pull up, right now!" Bream shouted to the pilot, who kept his head down and drove on very slowly, dipping left and right, as if looking for a place to land. Bream felt a line of pinches at his neck, as if a collar made of needles had been tightened. He swatted at his neck and saw blood on his hand, but no ants. Perhaps these bites were from mosquitoes or gnats. He'd once been bitten on his tongue. He had a horror of swallowing one intact. What would that be like, stung somewhere on the inside?

"Get his oil," Bream ordered McClellan, pointing at the *canoa* Indian. "I'll set the fires myself if I have to! The men are leaving, look! What did she say to chase them away? Superstitious fools!" He was no good at balancing himself on a moving boat; he lost his footing and sat down heavily.

It took him a moment to right himself again. When he looked up, the woman was gone.

"Did she just vanish?"

McClellan shook his head. He hadn't tried to get any oil at all; he hadn't moved at all. "She turned and walked away. Look, you have to be more careful here. You've angered her with all this. I hope you haven't ruined it for me, either. She's got influence, power. There's something to it, something is going to happen. Can't you feel it? She's a priestess after all, she's in tune with everything alive here. Haven't you ever wondered why ants are so organized, how they can act together? Even what their intentions are? It makes you think."

"For God's sake, McClellan, think about what?"

McClellan stared at him intently for a moment. "It makes me think about what they might plan on doing."

It began to rain again, all at once, a waterfall of rain. "Let's get back before the big rain starts," McClellan said finally, turning away from him and instructing the pilot.

Bream wanted to shout, *This isn't the big rain?* But he'd been there long enough to know. It would get bigger.

One of his floating lawns had pulled off and away and he didn't care. Let it all rot. His ear throbbed, red and swollen. He didn't remember that bite. He ordered insecticides to be sprayed everywhere, even though the stench annoyed him. He ordered the servants to find more ants, to go out into the jungle and find ants, to find ants and find ants and find ants, he wanted to see all of them dead, all those vile and hateful beings. He gave his orders and stalked along the veranda as the blistering rain poured. Each drop seemed needle-sharp. Let them leave their bowls of dead ants in front of his door. He would drink gin until he couldn't stand, he decided.

Which he did.

He woke in the morning to a thin sun and a fierce headache and a mouth that felt like rot. There was an acrid odor in the air. The sun was heating something up, he thought, and rubbed his eyes. He looked blearily straight ahead, at the palm-wood wall of his room, which shimmied in his hung-over state.

To his horror, the wall wavered and slid down to the floor. He rubbed his eyes again, and the wall (now the floor) moved towards

him.

They were ants! Millions of ants! A great moving blanket of horror, heading for him.

"McClellan!" he shouted, throwing himself off the farthest side of the bed. "McClellan!" There was no reason for McClellan to be there, but Bream yelled his name because McClellan was the only other man around who belonged to a world where things like this couldn't happen.

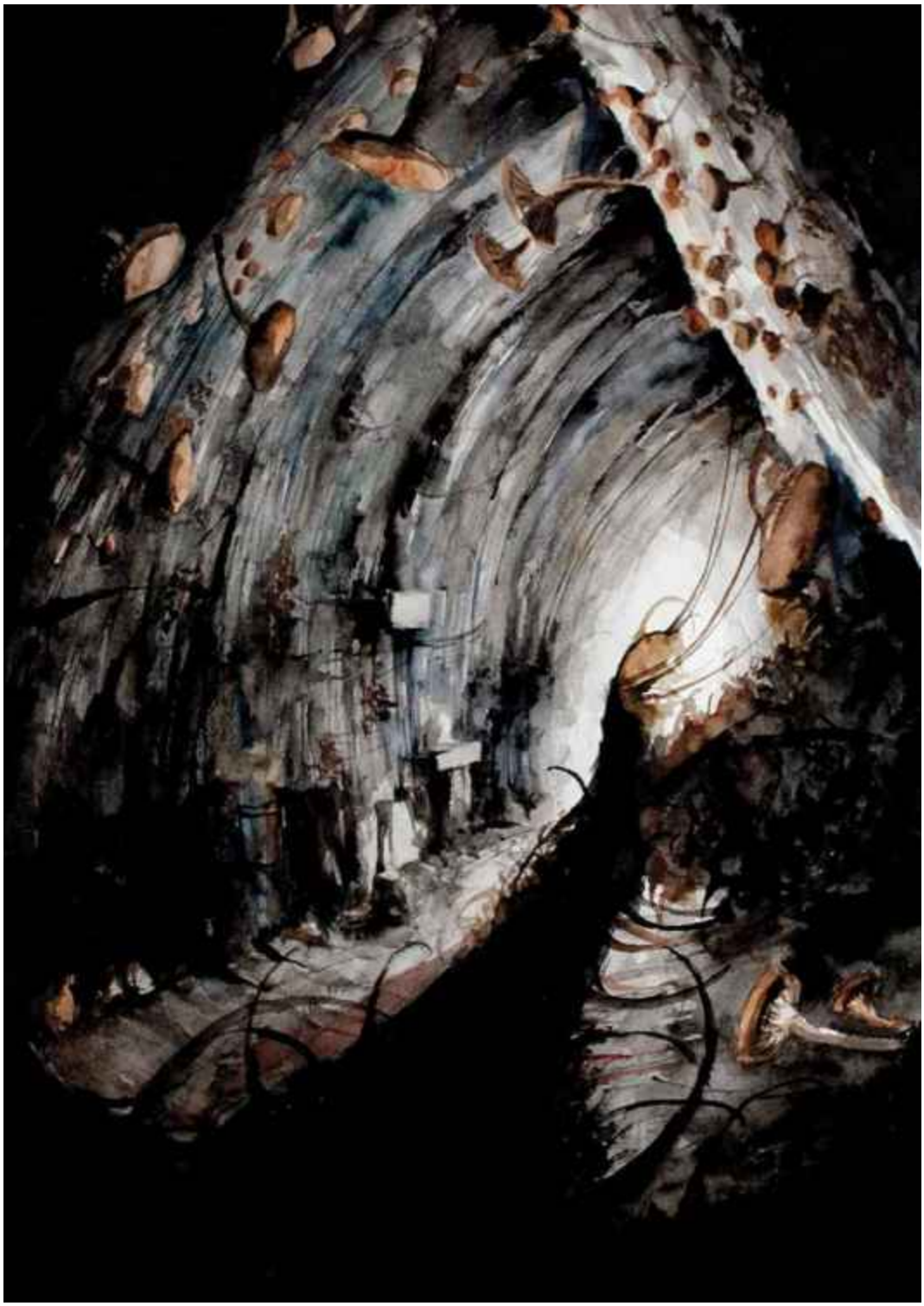
His teeth chattered. Every inch of his skin was red with bites. He went to scratch them automatically and saw to his horror that what he thought were welts on his arms were ants in rows, biting down. He looked wildly at the doorway. Surely a servant or someone had heard him? Surely someone would come for him?

The door creaked open and a figure stood there, surveying the scene.

It was the woman from the market, with that orchid in her arms. The orchid blinked the eyes in its flower face and smiled. It must be a hallucination! More ants swarmed in behind her, heading for Bream.

"Go, my daughters," she commanded. When had she learned to speak English? He flailed against the stings and bites and eyes—all the tiny eyes intent on him.

"Go, my daughters," she repeated, and he could hear shrill insect cries now, at his ears, at his mouth, the tiniest shouts of joy, the savage grinding of their ceaseless jaws.



Dearest Daddy

Lois H. Gresh

The mushroom jiggled on its stalk, bobbed behind two men, then popped back into view. My voice faltered. To my right, Daddy untwisted from his pretzel shape, and his fists hardened. His bruised knuckles flew at me just as the mushroom stalk blurred, and a bald man's face loomed, sneer on the lips and lust in the eyes. I was nine.

Daddy uncurled his fingers and yanked the tattered bow from my hair. "Sing," he screamed, and he crushed my bow beneath his foot.

I shrank back and blinked the tears from my eyes.

Mommy, why did you have to go? Why did you leave me here?

Memories gurgled up. All I knew of Mommy was what Daddy always told me.

Drunk.

Drug addict.

Whore.

Mommy, why did you have to die?

Dead on the street, Daddy always said, *dead in the gutter where she was born.*

But—

Don't believe Daddy. He's a drunk.

"Sing, Clarisse!" Daddy snapped me back to the present.

I blinked once more, and my vision cleared. The mushroom came into focus. I saw that it was actually a man's face. A bald man. The stalk was his body, and he was skinny like me.

If I gazed at the man while I sang, maybe he'd toss me a coin—after he pinched my ass, of course.

A pack of them, all twice my height, gathered around me. They ignored Daddy, but I knew he didn't care. He just wanted their money, and I could get it for him more easily than he could. Listening to a girl sing pleased them more than watching a man

twist himself into odd shapes and walk on his hands.

Anyone would prefer me over Daddy. He was creepy and weird. Maybe it was the way his limbs twisted backward at the joints. Maybe it was his chipped teeth or his whiskey-fogged eyes. Maybe it was his greasy sourness, the filthy clothes. Or maybe it was the skin on his fingers, so thick and rough, like animal hide, I thought. Or maybe it was how he treated me, as if he hated me and wanted me dead, but kept me around to sing for money.

The usual catcalls started up. Eyes raked down my body. I knew what they wanted, and it wasn't a song.

"Earn your supper, girl." My daddy knew what the men wanted, too. He would sell me for a swig of booze, he would.

If I refused to sing, he would beat me until I passed out. He would abandon me again, and I'd be all alone in the city, just another lost girl.

And so I sang:

Don't want no fears,
no tears,
and no fake smiles.
The stars have died,
the men have lied,
the moon is dead,
the sky is lead.
Never let me go,
treat me kind,
and you will find
in my eyes
a rainbow.

I hit the highest note and then sank to the lowest, my voice sweet but robust, and the men thundered their approval and pelted me with coins. I protected my face with my right arm. My body was already badly bruised from peltings and beatings, but my *face*—

I couldn't let anything hit my *face*, not ever, because the gashes and bruising would make it harder for me to sing.

Daddy grunted and scooped up the money. I had done well, and he was pleased. For now, I was safe.

Or so I thought.

After Daddy left for the bars, I went looking for the trash cans. I had a few favorites. One was by a weathered house with boarded-up windows and a sagging roof. Out front were the stragglers, people like me, who lived in the rubbish. I dug through the can and found a scrap of bread, sweet from mold. I knew it wouldn't hurt me. I'd eaten enough rotting bread to know.

The night was cold and brittle. The stars hung like icicles. The moon shivered low in the sky. I curled up in the alley next to the house and fell asleep on a blanket of garbage.

I dreamed that my daddy loved me.

But it was just a dream.

When I awoke, the sun glared at me and the sky wept ice, and pinning my knees to the cement was an old hacking man whose spittle was brown.

I kicked him off and jumped up.

All my fault Daddy was a drunk and hated me. All my fault Mommy died when I was born. I screamed and beat my fists against the weathered house, and I cursed as splinters drove into my flesh. Bloody raw, my fists were, and they hurt, and I knew it would be hell to get the splinters out. And yet…

And yet, the pain calmed me. This was worth everything. Physical pain took the edge off emotional pain, and I was alone and empty with no hope for the future or for joy of any kind.

The old man slumped onto his left side. He probably wouldn't live much longer. Men had beaten him down, and nature would finish him off.

Sapped of strength, ice battering me, I hobbled from the alley onto the main street. Ice clung to my hair and thin dress. I would get pneumonia. I would die.

Police with ice-coated whiskers and caps were rounding up all the men on the street, for what purpose I didn't know. Some struggled, others went willingly, probably figuring they'd get a meal and a roof over their heads during the storm.

I pushed aside three little kids and took their place beneath a shop awning. Ice clanked off the awning and clattered to the street.

The sky darkened from white to gray, and the sun went into hiding.

A figure darted from the group of men being herded down the street. He looked familiar, but though I squinted, I couldn't make out his features through the wind and ice. He slid toward me, waving his arms like a mad man.

I clutched the door handle of the shop and pulled and pulled, but the shop was closed.

And then someone grabbed my arm.

I struggled to break free, I kicked and I flailed, and I started to scream, "Let go! Let go! What do you want?" but the words broke in my mouth.

It was my daddy.

He reeked of whiskey and body stink, and I recoiled.

He stood directly over me, bent at the waist, and his black eyes bored into me, and his mouth was close to my face.

"You'll always be mine, Clarisse," he said. "I'll never let you go."

"What do you mean?"

"War," he said. "They want us all to fight. I have to run away. I'm leaving for a faraway city."

"But what about me, Daddy? I have to go with you!"

"No. You'll slow me down. They'll get me, and I'll die at war. I can't fight. I refuse."

"But—"

"Go to Madame Francesca at Second and Main."

"The whorehouse?"

I clutched his jacket and begged, but my daddy was too strong for me and pried my fingers loose. He held both of my wrists in one hand. A grin spread, the broken teeth parted, and as he turned to go, he released my wrists and hissed, "I'll come back for you, Clarisse. Remember, I'll never let you go."

And then he was gone.

The last thing I remembered was a scrape of whiskers and a whiff of whiskey and unwashed flesh.

He disappeared into the ice and the crowds, past the police and all those who were heading to war.

My daddy left me there. To die.

I cried, and the tears froze on my lashes and cheeks.

I'll be honest. I was crying from fear. I didn't really care if I died, even at nine. Living wasn't so great. But we all have a survival instinct—most of us, anyway. And so there remained a tiny part of me that always percolated up from the depths and helped me fight on.

My lips were chapped. They hurt. My teeth chattered, and I couldn't stop them. My fingers were numb from cold.

I forced myself to stop crying, for what was the point? Crying would do me no good. Life was what it was, and it was always bad.

I would take refuge at the whorehouse, and when the storm ended, I'd escape from the Madame's grip and get lost in the city streets again. That was my plan, and so I slipped across the ice toward Second and Main.

All the girls knew Francesca. She tried to recruit us into the whorehouse as early as eight. My daddy had never allowed it, though other girls, those without daddies, weren't as lucky.

Could I really view my life this way, that my daddy brought me *luck*?

Even at nine, I was jaded enough to dismiss the idea as pathetic and childish.

When I pushed on the door at the corner of Second and Main, it opened easily. Madame Francesca's house was always open for business.

I stumbled inside, and it was warm.

My body started to shake. The room whirled, a blur of red velvet and plush sofas and thin rugs with stains on them. Crackling fire, all orange and red and yellow, heat beckoning me. I staggered toward the fireplace, arms outstretched. Almost fainted. Stopped in mid-step.

And now whirling toward me were girls with hard eyes and bruised limbs, frizzed hair and red glossy lips. Breasts and bustiers. Red. Garters without stockings. Black. Skimpy underpants, concealing little.

Arms encircled me, and the bodies were soft, warm, and

fragrant. I sank into those arms and against those bodies, and my eyes fluttered shut. Red, all I saw was red. Flowers, all I smelled were flowers. Voices, so soft and sweet, and no whiskers and no men pinching my ass.

"Bring her to the pink room, and let her rest." Madame Francesca wavered into view, and the girls backed off, fear flickering in their eyes. She studied me intently for a few seconds. Close up, she smelled of tobacco and lilacs, a nauseating blend that I would later find comforting. Her hair was long and black and wound into old-fashioned spirals. The red painted onto her lips welled in the cracks carved by old age. White powder and bright blush did little to hide the wrinkled cheeks and forehead. Huge blue eyes with heavy liner and mascara blinked at me. "She's young." The eyes softened, and I imagined them in her youth, so alluring to all the men she'd serviced. I could tell that she had once been beautiful.

Had my mommy been beautiful, too?

"I said, bring her to the pink room, didn't I?" Red-tipped nails, long finger pointing at one girl and then another. They scampered back to my side, looped me over their soft, soft arms, and dragged me down worn carpet to a pink, pink room.

My eyes blinked on a yellow-stained pillowcase of cherubs. The wallpaper in the top corner of the room hung limp and flaccid, a drooping pink. The blankets were rough but warm, and they smelled like tobacco, but in this room, there was no lilac, only tobacco tainted by male body stink. As my eyes shut, I fell into a dream of Daddy, and I heard his words.

Drunk.

Drug addict.

Whore.

Over time, I would know nothing else.

With the war raging, business lagged, and the customers I serviced in my first few months tended toward the elderly and sagging, men I could barely tease into payment. Madame Francesca pushed us to do more and more for these men and for smaller amounts of pay. I was barely alive, and during work, I learned to giggle and gasp while flatlining my thoughts. I told myself that, if I

wasn't really there, then I wasn't really participating, was I? I might as well have been dead.

"You don't belong here, Clarisse. Your heart isn't in it. The other girls do much better for me."

"But where—"

The eyes glinted, hard and sharp. "There's a bar. Underground in the tunnels. They need girls. I know the owner. He'll take most anything I send. He was once a special customer of mine."

"Underground? In tunnels?" I couldn't grasp what she was saying. How long would I have to live in subterranean gloom servicing yet more old men, those who were strange and sick enough to live beneath the streets?

"You'll go tonight. Trust me, you'll be much happier there, my dear."

I left with nothing, just the clothes I'd worn the night Daddy left me. The girls gave me powders to sniff, and this relaxed me. Some of the girls cried for me, and to this day, I love them for it. They're probably all dead, of course.

A horse and buggy driven by one of Madame's customers dumped me off in the middle of nowhere. Gloom was settling across the ravaged trees: naked limbs, clawing fingers, a red-tipped sky. The air was cool and damp and scented with pine. On either side of the dirt road, dark forest blocked my vision. Branches crackled. Animals whispered warnings. I didn't know how to find Madame's friend, this man she had serviced long ago.

I inched my way down the road, which dwindled to a path, and every few minutes, I paused and peered in all directions, even behind me, for I feared that at any moment, something would pop out and attack me.

The sky grew black. A cold mist settled on my skin. My shoes were ancient, too small for my feet, and had holes in them. Rocks jabbed my soles. Branches tripped me.

When I felt I could no longer walk, I sank against a tree, and I cried.

I cried for myself, pathetic as it was, only nine, an orphan, a whore, cold, sick, hungry, and lost.

I cried for all the girls I'd known in the city and then at Madame's. Those who slept with me in the alleys, those who ate from the dumpsters with me, those whose daddies sold them off and whose mommies didn't care.

I cried for us all.

When finally I could cry no more, I heard in the silence faint laughter, and it was deep and hearty like men laugh when drunk. I pushed away from the tree, and I hobbled toward the sound, and eventually, I came to a clearing, and in that clearing was an expanse of rock stretching in both directions. Drilled into the rock, or blasted into it—I didn't know which—was an opening the size of a medium-sized man. *This must be the entrance*, I thought, *to the tunnels and the bar.*

I ducked inside.

Black gripped me. I stretched my arm to the rock wall and felt my way down the corridor. It was cold, dry, dusty. I stepped slowly, frightened, though the floor seemed smooth. I came to a sharp right turn, looked over my shoulder and inched forward, and I watched as the charcoal of night receded behind me.

Black on black now…

The male laughter echoed through the tunnel, luring me on. Being with drunk men, those who cozy up to whores, would beat being alone in the woods, especially during a war.

A light flickered in the distance. I moved as quickly as I could on bloody feet, and finally, when I neared the light, what I saw was breathtaking:

A large cave with low ceilings and a few torches set along the walls, a rough-hewn wooden bar held aloft by stacked slabs of rock, barrels for stools, and three men drinking from bottles and smoking cigars. Branches shaped like antlers decorated the walls.

The tunnel spasmed, and I lost my footing and fell. I spread my arms, cushioned the blow, but the rock slammed against my right hip, and I winced as pain shot down my leg.

All three men swiveled. A fourth man—the bartender, I presumed—jerked up a section of the bar and hurried over to me. He lifted me in his arms, and he stared as if not knowing what he

had found.

I held my breath so I wouldn't whimper. I didn't want them to know I was scared. But although this fate was better than a fate outside the tunnels, I *was* scared, for I was now at the mercy of these men.

"What do we have here?" The bartender's voice rasped as if his throat was sore, and his words puffed out in white mist. His eyes were a blue so light they seemed almost transparent. Long hair, dark and thick, hung down his back, and from each ear dangled a tiny gold loop. I peered at the patterns of his black whiskers across his cadaver-pale skin.

The other men, all as cadaver-pale and all in heavy coats, surveyed me and then set their bottles down. "Who is this, Andre? Why has a little girl come here?"

Their accents were archaic. I barely understood.

"Madame sent me, from Second and Main."

"Ah, Madame Francesca. I see." The bartender, Andre, placed me on a barrel and propped me up. He didn't leave my side. Perhaps he feared that I might fall and injure myself. Or perhaps he just wasn't done studying me.

A rustle of cloth, and a girl entered the bar from the tunnels. She was perhaps five years my senior. Brown hair, brown eyes, scrawny, and wearing a tattered pink dress. I recognized the lilac perfume. This girl had also been sent by Madame Francesca. I wondered how long she'd been here.

"Gloria, take this new girl to a room, let her rest, feed her, and prime her, get her ready. Then bring her back to me."

The girl nodded, her expression like wax. She looped an arm around my waist and helped me limp into the gloom. I wondered how she would prime me, and why.

She said nothing, and I was afraid to ask.

The tunnel sloped downward and angled to the left and then twisted right a few times. Gloria knew her way. Was she counting her steps?

She half-dragged me into a cave lit by torches. What might pass as girls slept on the rock floor. Skeletal, they slept like bones heaped

into mounds. Each wore a ripped dress. One appeared badly burned with her face half-melted. Another was missing an arm. And yet a third had only one breast. All were deformed in one way or another.

I slept, I ate what Gloria gave to me—white button mushrooms that were firm and sweet—and I grew stronger. Gloria did *not* train me in the ways of men. Andre must have told her that I'd already served as a whore for Madame Francesca. Periodically, Gloria took one girl, then another from the cave, and hours later, the girl would return, depleted and exhausted. While awake, they ate the white button mushrooms.

From time to time, I had the feeling they were trying to talk to me but that words could no longer form in their mouths. Haunted eyes, downcast, that avoided me and gazed vacantly at the rock walls. During meals, they sat like wax dolls, expressionless, bony fingers sliding mushroom slivers into the cracks of their mouths, chewing absently as if sustenance no longer mattered.

One night—or was it a day? I had no way of knowing—Andre told me that I was ready. He set me to work in his bar, wiping the booze off the wood and pouring alcohol into dirty glasses. There was no question that the deformed girls were whores, with Gloria serving in Madame Francesca's position.

Would I become deformed as well, a scrawny whore incapable of speech or life? Was that what this place was? An outpost for whores who couldn't make it elsewhere?

And then came the needles.

The whores pinned me down while Gloria injected me, with what I did not know. But the buzz was euphoric, and I was happier than I'd ever been. I learned to look forward to the injections, which Gloria administered after bringing me back from the bar. In time, she gave me needles, and I injected myself whenever the euphoria slipped. Along with wine, the drugs helped me shift myself elsewhere when the men wanted sex. And yes, whoring was a big part of my day, every day.

I went on like this for a very long time.

White button mushrooms. Sleep. Whore. Wine. Injections.

I loved the drugs. The euphoria killed the emotional pain. It

worked even better than physical pain.

And the drugs and wine were free, as much as I could shoot up and guzzle.

Honestly, I couldn't believe my good fortune.

And that's when I began to sing again.

It started as humming, but quickly, I was singing the melodies I'd sung on the streets for Daddy.

The men couldn't get enough of my singing, and I became more animated, playing to my little crowd. Andre poured drink after drink, which the men swilled. We whores were busier than ever, and I was the favorite. Gloria woodenly walked the tunnels, bringing the girls from the bordello to the bar and then back again. Only I stayed in the bar between men. I sang, and I swear they seemed to love me, and I drank with them, and always, we laughed. Every so often, the tunnels spasmed, and we would lurch and then regain our balance. It was just something else to laugh about, and it all became routine.

I forgot about the outside world. I mean, I knew about it in the back of my mind, but it no longer mattered to me.

It was easy to avoid Gloria and the other girls. They weren't a friendly crowd. They serviced the men, they ate, and they slept. They seemed to have no other interests, and while this puzzled me at first, in time, I just didn't care.

Given enough time, anything can become normal.

One night, after my last singing shift, I grabbed a torch from the bordello wall and slipped into the tunnels. I wasn't sleepy, and I was anxious for a little fun, a deviation from the routine.

I wound my way through a maze, passing through large rock rooms stacked with wines. The floor sloped steeply several times. I knew that, if the torch burned down or flickered out, I would be doomed. I wouldn't be able to find my way back in the dark. I would certainly die down here, and nobody would know how to find me. Nonetheless, I continued on my adventure, thinking the odds of life and death were about equal, and perhaps life held a slightly better chance. Despite my reasoning, I was acutely on edge. The deathlike silence of the place horrified me, and I swear I heard my own heart pounding. I mean, what if a madman, a killer, was on

the loose down here? He could jump out, grab me, and then torture me to slow death and nobody would be the wiser.

I steeled my nerves as best I could. I told myself that only a little girl would be scared. But such is childhood, when often, we're afraid of unknown monsters but not of our own reality. I think it's because we don't know much about reality when we're little, and it's easier to be afraid of monsters.

I peered behind me into gloom. *Perhaps I should go back to Andre and his bar, back to the bordello. Perhaps I should venture out another time and be more careful to mark my way. Perhaps…*

The torch light cast faint orbs across the rock.

The ceiling dipped low. The tunnels narrowed.

That's when I saw the first chiseling. Where the wall met the ceiling, someone had chiseled "*No 2 1917 Verdun*," and beneath this sign, a chart detailing the harvests of assorted mushrooms during the Great War fought long before my Daddy's time.

Perhaps men still lived down here.

Perhaps one would jump out and…

I cut the thought short.

I wanted to see what was ahead, and now I felt confident that I could find my way back. I'd return to "*No 2 1917 Verdun*," and from there, make my way to the caves stocked with the wines.

I passed a poorly rendered cartoon, also etched into the rock wall. It featured a man with moustache and goatee, tailcoat, top hat, and a walking stick. In front of him was a chicken head. Behind him was a headless chicken's body. Not understanding the cartoon, I moved on.

Whenever I neared a fork in the tunnels, I trained my torch at the juncture of the walls and ceiling. At the next such fork, someone had chiseled "*No 3 1917 Marmitte a Popol et Grenier de Mommartre*." Men *must* have lived in these tunnels during the Great War. Is this how Andre had come to live down here? Had his father's father hid in the tunnels? I'd have to remember to ask him upon my return.

Shortly past the juncture, my torch illuminated what must have been many hundreds of white mushroom bundles packed across the floor. I crouched and held the torch directly over the mushrooms,

which sprouted in tight clusters from black earth. I plucked a few, wiped them on my dress, and ate them. They didn't taste like mushrooms found in city dishes. These were like candy.

The mushrooms grow best in the caves. Slowly and with just the right amount of moisture, Andre had told me. The rock of the tunnels was dry everywhere with no evidence of water. I assumed Andre had a secret source, a trickle hidden deep, deep within the tunnels.

I ate about twenty mushrooms, then continued, and after a few more twists and turns, entered an open area packed with brown mushrooms growing in tan earth speckled with black. I didn't eat these mushrooms because Andre and Gloria never provided us with this type. *They might be poisonous*, I thought.

And then I came across another room, this one packed with upstanding blocks of black earth, from which sprouted huge spiraled mushroom growths. *Ridges* of filthy gray mushrooms, growing one on top of the other and wound in huge whorls. Again, I didn't eat these mushrooms, fearing poison and death.

And then later, there were sacks from which gigantic mushrooms protruded in clusters of a hundred or more. Yellow, with formations half a meter long and half a meter thick.

I staggered through the tunnels, thrusting my torch into one cave after another. Most of the caves were empty. A few held mushroom sacks and caches of wine. I memorized road sign after road sign, intent on remembering the route back to the bordello.

Eventually, I crept into a cave which held large blocks of black mold from which thick brown mushrooms sprouted. The mold reminded me of the hair on the greasy old men I serviced. The mushrooms were as large and yellow as the ones I'd seen earlier, the gigantic mushrooms in clusters of a hundred or more. But in this cave, some of the mushrooms were even larger, and filaments coated the walls like thick mesh. The ceilings flaked powder and I sneezed. Sawdust, mold, and filaments seemed to breathe in here, in some harmonic rasping melody… as if I was trapped in a giant, diseased lung.

I set the torch into a rusty iron holder quivering upon the wall. From afar, the rock spasmed. Eerie sounds echoed down the long,

lonely corridors into the cave where I cuddled on mushroom mold. The filaments were soft and thickly knitted. They cradled me.

I slept soundly, and when I awoke, took my torch, which had burned down to the hilt, and made my way back through the tunnels.

Every night for weeks, maybe months, I crept off to my special cave, and I fell asleep to the rocking of the tunnels, the echoes, and the comforting softness.

I was dizzy from the injections and the wine, with my belly full of mushrooms, when one day, while staggering toward Andre's bar, I heard something odd.

It was my song. But I wasn't singing it.

Never let me go,
treat me kind,
and you will find
in my eyes
a rainbow.

Men laughed. "Aw, knock it off, would ya? We prefer the girl. Wait till you hear the girl."

I lurched around a corner. I entered the bar.

The stars have died,
the men have lied,
the moon is dead,
the sky is lead.

My head reeled. "That's my song!" I cried.

"No. It's *my* song. You were only borrowing it."

I recognized the voice.

I recognized the whiff of whiskey and the body stink.

"No," I screamed, "it can't be you! How can it be *you*?" Surely, I was hallucinating. Daddy couldn't be here. Daddy had escaped the war by running far, far away. He'd told me so himself. And yet, many men had clearly hid from the war here in this subterranean hell. Andre had confirmed that his father had done the very same thing. So maybe, just maybe…

But Daddy left me to die.

Daddy left me to this fate, a whore to sick, old men, a singer in

an underground bar, a drug addict, a drunk.

Just like my mommy.

Drunk.

Drug addict.

Whore.

He'd told me so himself.

My mind whirling, I snatched a torch from the wall and dashed back into the tunnels. *Daddy Daddy Daddy*, I would escape from this Daddy, this fake Daddy, this can't be Daddy.

I crashed from one side of the tunnel to the other, and the rock was hard and bruised my arms and legs. I was so intoxicated that I barely noticed. The pain registered as dull throbbing. What hurt more was that Daddy was here, making me remember that I'd been born with no life in front of me.

I glanced over my shoulder, saw the chipped teeth in the glow of a torch held high to his face. His laughter echoed through the tunnels, cascaded off the walls around me like the thunder of water from a cliff.

I ran more quickly.

I bashed my leg badly against the rock.

For a moment—*just a moment*—I stopped, cringed, and turned to look…

Daddy had mangled himself into pretzel shape, his limbs twisted backward at the joints. He hurled himself down the tunnel after me, his body whirling from hand to foot to foot to hand like a wheel with spokes.

I screamed and fled. I ignored the pain in my leg and careened past "*No 2 1917 Verdun*."

Mangled Daddy whirled after me.

I passed the cartoon etching of the man with the chicken head.

A tremor in the tunnels, and Daddy cussed loudly. I peeked: Daddy mangled on the wall. Daddy's limbs unfurling from twisted shape. Daddy upright. Daddy twisting back to wheel form…

My *heart* was mangled.

My *mind* was twisted.

All Daddy's fault. Not my fault, not any of it.

And yet, even knowing what he was, all I really wanted was for Daddy to love me.

How could I make him love me?

I passed "*No 3 1917 Marmitte a Popol et Grenier de Mommartre*."

I crouched and slid into the cave where I slept. The black filaments, sawdust, and mold padded all sides of the cave in lush softness. The brown mushrooms trembled on their stalks. The room was my womb. The harmonic rasping trilled up, then fluttered down, then rose again in lavish melodies.

I set my torch into the rusty iron holder.

Daddy whirled to a halt at the entrance to my womb. He ducked, his head poked in, the grin widened, the black eyes chiseled in on me.

He snapped his legs backward so they were straight against his body. He fell to the floor and wriggled into the cave. The legs snapped back into normal position, and he stood over me.

"Daddy, please…"

No answer.

"Daddy, please don't hurt me."

"And why would I hurt you?"

Because I ran from you. Because I was happy without you. Because you need to control me. Because you'll never let me go.

"Because you always hurt me," I said.

"I sneaked to town, Madame told me she sent you here, I came to get you. How is that hurting you?"

You hurt me because you turned me into a drunk, a drug addict, a whore. Did you kill Mommy, too? I didn't have the courage to say any of it.

He leaned, grabbed my arm, and wrenched me up. At first, I cowered, but then I drew myself up. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"What's wrong, Clarisse? Nothing to say? You're my girl. You'll do what I want."

"You don't own me."

"Oh, yes, I do," and then he jerked my arm again. This time, I cried out from the pain. I couldn't help it.

He blew out his torch and set it on the thick filament padding. He grabbed my wrist in one hand while continuing to jerk my hurt arm with the other. I squirmed, felt so low, so meaningless. Tears of shame burned in my eyes.

I steeled myself.

I would not let him have the satisfaction.

I kicked his kinked, sick legs as hard as I could. He screamed as his legs folded back. He collapsed and his body ratcheted around, parts grinding, bones popping into weird pretzel places.

His tough-skin fists clamped my legs. I fell backward, hitting the filament padding. A poof of dust and mold rose, and I coughed and squeezed my eyes shut. He yanked me toward him, and now his foul mouth was inches from mine. I could smell how close he was even before I opened my eyes.

My right hand found his dropped torch. It was warm but not hot, and the fire was gone.

I didn't even pause.

I slammed the torch into his head, right on top where the greasy hair clumped. His face sagged, his eyes shut, and he toppled flat over me. I shoved him off, leapt to my feet, and raised the torch as high as I could. Smashed it back down, this time cracking it into his face.

He was out.

Blood streamed from a gash on his forehead. It flowed down both sides of his face into the filaments and mold beneath us. I'd also broken his nose, and I couldn't tell through the blood, but maybe his mouth was crushed into his teeth, too.

I didn't care. I was glad, and I laughed.

But as I stared at him, I began to fear that I'd killed him, so I leaned in closely and smelled the foul breath puffing from his mashed lips.

He was still alive. This was good.

I would teach him to love me.

All the men loved me, didn't they, so why not Daddy?

I injected him with my euphoria drug, and leaving him alone in the dark cave, I took both torches with me.

Later, I brought him white mushrooms and forced him to eat a few. He had trouble chewing. His mouth was a mess.

I injected him again.

Blood gurgled from his lips. The black of his eyes slipped beneath his upper lids.

I gave him an extra shot of dope, and I let the euphoria float him out nice and good.

"I love you, Daddy," I said.

Then I held up one of his feet and twisted his leg. I cranked it round and round until it snapped where the thigh met the crotch. I did the same thing to his other leg. If he hadn't been a contortionist, I wouldn't have had the strength, but as I figured it, a whirling man takes his chances, right?

He was so high on the drugs that he didn't react to the pain.

Well, maybe he twitched oh-so-slightly, but that was all.

I told myself it was all fine, and I returned to the bordello and the bar, the men and Andre, the whoring, the drinking, the singing. At night, I came to my Daddy and fed him mushroom bits with sips of wine. His lips didn't work well, and the mushroom and purple wine dribbled down his face and chin.

Everything—mushrooms, wine, blood, urine—eventually sank into the mat of filaments and mold beneath him.

We continued, he and I, in this manner for what must have been weeks. I have to say, in all honesty, that this was the happiest time of my life. It was a time when the struggles of being human didn't matter. It was a time when all seemed right in the world, at peace. It was a time carved out from ordinary time.

One night, as I was singing for the men, my voice cracked. I couldn't restart it, couldn't reach my high notes or use the sultry tones Andre loved so much. My whore performance was mediocre, and even the oldest men, the ones who couldn't get it up under any circumstances, complained about me to Andre.

"Daddy, it's not fair. I don't understand."

He didn't answer me. He couldn't.

He lay upon the thick blackness with his legs shattered and twisted in bizarre formations. I tried to lift his right arm, but it was

too stiff to move. His other arm was also stiff.

My own body had grown scary-thin. I felt a soreness in my legs and arms, a stiffness when I tried to bend.

The filaments were thicker and heavier. They hung in whorls from the walls and ceiling. They looped in elaborate patterns over our faces as we lay there, side by side, on the mushroom-mold floor.

The tunnels shuddered. The floor heaved once, then dropped back into place. Beside me, Daddy jerked up then thumped down. His body was rigid, hard like the wood of Andre's bar.

Around us, the filaments twitched and grew, a black-gray kaleidoscope of whorls with huge brown mushrooms poking out everywhere, bobbing to some lunatic tune that keened from the filaments themselves.

The entire cave pulsed.

Breathing.

Keening.

Rasping.

It was hard to pull away from the rhythms, the harmonies, the womb of my cave. It took all of my strength, but finally, I fumbled in my pocket for the hypos, injected Daddy and me, triple doses each, and then I slipped away.

The following day, my singing grew hoarse like the croaking of a frog. Andre was furious. "Your heart isn't in it anymore, Clarisse. The men complain. You no longer please them. The other girls do so much better."

Isn't this what Madame had said right before she threw me out and sent me to Andre?

A trill of fear swept through me.

"But where—"

And isn't this what I said in response to Madame?

"There is nowhere else you can go after you've been here, Clarisse." Andre rubbed a dirty cloth around a glass. The tiny gold loop on his ear blazed light into my eyes. I knew this was impossible, that I must be seeing things. His whiskers gently undulated on his cadaver-pale skin.

I begged. "Let me sing again tomorrow. I'll do better, I promise.

Let the men take me tomorrow. I'll do all of them, I swear."

He set the glass on the bar, lifted a bottle of wine, and poured. He took a sip, pursed his lips. He studied my face. I shifted my feet and looked down. What if he said no? Where would I go? Finally, he said, "One more chance, but I don't need this kind of headache. Please my men tomorrow, and you can stay."

I ran off to tell Daddy.

But nothing I said seemed to register. Daddy still couldn't speak. I sat beside him in our special cave immersed in the harmony of a life we shared. We breathed in rhythm with the filaments. The rock spasmed, tremors shook the floor, and the filaments sang their unearthly tune. I sang with them, my voice rasping but fitting in just fine with the voices of the cave.

I fed Daddy. I gave him sips of wine. "I'll take care of you," I said. "Don't worry, Daddy. I'll never leave you."

And still, he didn't respond. There was no smile, no hug, no reassurance that Daddy appreciated me, much less loved me.

What would it take?

No matter how nice I was to Daddy, he gave nothing back.

I lay beside him, snuggled close. I was having a hard time moving my arms and legs. We lay there, like two stiff boards, side by side. Father and daughter, the same. The thought made me happy, and I drifted to sleep.

Later, with stiff hands, I injected him with a heavy dose. As the drug kicked in, I thought I saw a flicker of warmth in his eyes. Just a flicker, for as soon as I saw it, it disappeared. But I *saw* it, I *swear* I did, and my heart soared. Finally, my Daddy loved me.

I lurched through the trembling tunnels, my mind reeling. Who knew how vast the tunnel system was? Who knew how many caves were down here? Just from the labyrinthine system I'd already discovered, I figured there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of caves. There must be water somewhere, too, else the mushrooms wouldn't have sprouted. I'd never asked Andre. It had slipped my mind. It didn't matter. I never saw Andre deep within the system. Like everyone else, he never ventured past the bar and bordello.

Were they afraid of the world beyond what little they knew?

These were men who feared the war, who lived beneath the ground rather than face reality. These were weak men.

But I wasn't weak. I would find the water, and together, Daddy and I would seek refuge many kilometers into the cave system, far from Andre and the men, far from the war. If I found the water, we would survive, and when the war ended, we'd emerge and live happily together in a beautiful city.

Yes. This is what we would do.

Back in the bar, I sang my best, but the men didn't want to hear me. They covered their ears. They screamed at Andre to shut me up.

But I sang with the harmonics of the caves, and it was so beautiful… how could they not love it?

"Get over here." Andre flicked his fingers at me.

My legs wouldn't bend at the knees. So stiff. I forced my legs to walk, and I did as Andre told me.

When I was behind the bar with him, he studied my face again. A finger touched my cheek. "So waxy," he said. The finger shifted to my hair. "So thin and dull," he said. He surveyed my body. "So scrawny."

"Give me wine," I rasped. "Please. Before you decide my fate, let me drink."

He raised a glass to my lips.

I couldn't part them.

Andre had to pry my lips apart to get the wine into my mouth.

I knew that I would never be able to sing again.

Andre knew it, too.

"But you can stay as long as you're able to move even a tiny bit," he said. "You can be like the others. The girls of Gloria." He smiled as if giving me a gift.

"What is…" I couldn't form the other words.

He nodded as if guessing my question. "Yes. What is it? What does this to you girls? Well, I don't know, Clarisse. A combination of the drugs you take and the special mushrooms we have down here? The atmosphere?"

Tears welled, and I couldn't blink them back. I was having trouble controlling my eyelids.

"You see, we men don't take your drugs and don't venture into those caves. We stay here, don't we? There's something in those tunnels that's just not right."

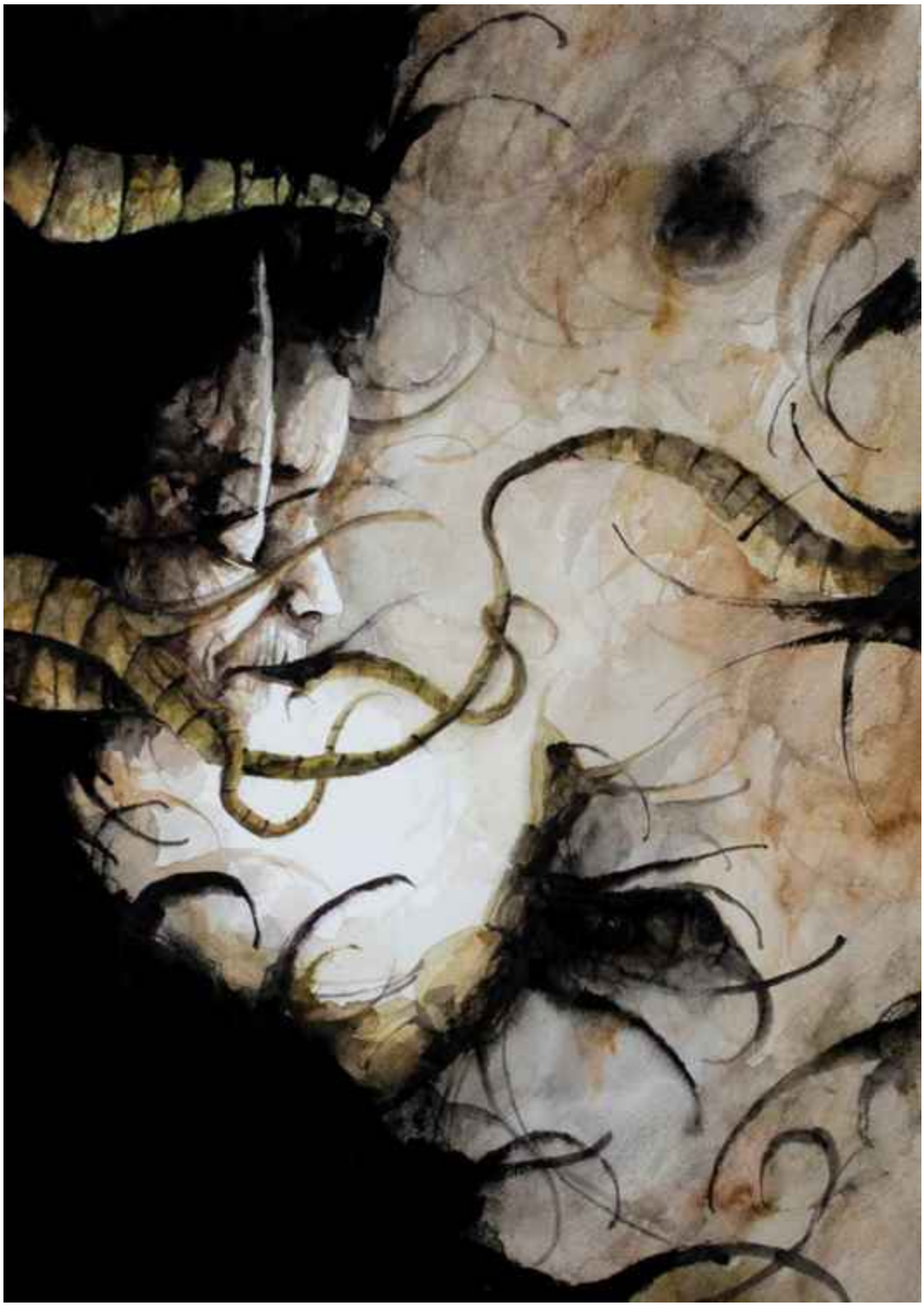
Daddy. What about you, Daddy? Nobody knows you're in the special cave. Nobody knows, and I can't move my lips to tell them.

My unblinking eyes saw the needle right before it plunged into my throat. Giant waves of euphoria crashed down my body. I seemed to melt across the wooden bar. I was golden. I was red. I was lilac, and tobacco. My heart pounded in rhythm to the filaments in Daddy's cave. My lungs breathed to the rhythm. My head filled with kaleidoscope whorls of black and gray, and with lunatic tunes.

I'll be your rainbow.

I'll never let you go.

I was one with Daddy, and I dreamed that he loved me.



Eye of the Beholder

Nancy Kilpatrick

She will never be the same. She knows that, accepts it. Life once made sense, but not now. Why did she listen to them? But it was *her* actions, right from the start, *her* making wrong decisions… It was as if she had intentionally entered a rank, twisting tunnel that drew vermin, narrowing, becoming ever more grave-like the further in she went, burying her alive with the awareness of… of this… this… abomination…

§

At the beginning, it hadn't been the intervention that bothered Liz; it was the fervor, the wild, ecstatic gleam in the eyes of her sister, her cousin, her best friend. She'd wondered why they were so avid about changing her but let it pass as caring.

"It's not life or death, you know!" she reminded them several times, progressively hearing her voice weaken as they brought up counter arguments.

Her best friend Marti was the voice of reason that rang in her ears afterward: "Liz, it *is* life or death! Do you want to die single? Childless?"

"I'm thirty-eight. Not exactly over the hill."

"Your best days are right this minute," her cousin Phyllis said. "It doesn't get any better from here. I should know."

Liz wanted to say, *Phyllis, you're only forty-eight, just ten years older than me. You're not exactly ready for an old-age home!* But whatever protests she had mounted over the last two hours had been countered with the same basic argument—if she didn't get married soon and start having kids, "which," they all were only too happy to reminder her, "you say you want", it will be "over." And they had a point. She did want those things. Badly. And time *was*

slipping by.

She'd brought up, "Well, Mom had me when she was forty-three, and I'm okay." The silence had been deafening. That they all thought she wasn't "okay" unnerved her.

"This is silly," Liz said, reaching for a breadstick on the coffee table laden with healthy food. She dipped one end into the sour cream and onion sauce. Instantly, Phyllis grabbed the breadstick from her hand and hissed at her.

Liz sighed. "Okay, okay, I give up! I'll go for a stupid facial."

"You'll go for dermabrasion!" Marti said.

"And Botox!" Phyllis ordered."

"You want me to have botulism injected into my—"

"And fills. Don't forget the collagen fills," Marti added. "That will get those wrinkles and sags out of your pouchy cheeks and give you the plumpness of youth."

"I thought you said I'm too fat," Liz snapped.

"Not fat, sweetie, just, well, you could stand to lose ten pounds and be better off for it."

Liz looked longingly at the breadsticks and heard her stomach rumble in sympathy. She hadn't eaten since lunch and now it was after 8 pm. Maybe if she just agreed to everything they'd let her have a grape!

"Look, Lizzie, hon, we're all on your side, you know." This from her perfect twin sister Tiffany. Slim, well-coiffed, stylishly dressed, glamorous or sophisticated—depending on the day—birthing a son named Jim, Jr. at thirty-one and more recently the mother of triplet girls. "Men have gotten *very* picky over the last couple of decades. Every male and female on the planet knows exactly what they want."

Liz wondered what deep knowledge Tiffany could possess with the same not-yet-four-decades under her belt, one of them childhood. She hadn't even dated until college! They might be twins, but they were so different, the two of them, so how could she take advice from her "kid" sister by three minutes who seemed to have everything and—

"Look what I had to do to get my Jim! What I do to keep him."

"True," Phyllis said. "You're not a slippers and robe kinda girl."

Tiffany shrugged. "I like to look good. So sue me. But it gets me what I want."

Liz wondered what was so wondrous about Jim, a tall, *GQ*-handsome guy with a fake smile full of thirty-two perfect teeth and a seven-figure income that kept him out of the house 15/7, presumably at his office at the brokerage firm, but who could be sure. And apparently Tiffany didn't care.

But Liz realized that she was jealous of her sister. Besides having the life she wanted, Tiffany had only worked for five years—as a fast-living flight attendant, which is where she had met Jim. Liz, on the other hand, had been relegated to curatorial assistant in the entomology department of the natural history museum's basement for the last fifteen years. But she was honest enough to know she was justifying. She *did* want to marry and have kids. That had been her dream all of her life. A dream that had eluded her so far, and time *was* running out. She'd always thought she would do anything to make that dream come true, so why was she resisting their suggestions? They were only trying to help her get what she wanted.

"The media is full of airbrushed women. Today's men are as demanding as women. They want perfection!" Tiffany went on knowingly.

"Why would I want a guy who demands a perfect woman?"

"Because that's the only kind there are?" Marti laughed, and everyone but Liz joined in.

That led to another serious silence, everyone but Liz shaking their head in agreement, followed by a chorus of pitying looks in Liz' direction.

Phyllis, the long-suffering one in this group, took Liz's hands in hers and said as if she were talking to one of the kids in the daycare she ran, or to a mental defective, "You have to play it the way they want to play it, Liz. It's pay for play. Once you've got the guy, the kids, the house, car, boat, fabulous clothes and vacations and more, if you get bored, you can let your hair down. By then you'll be tired of him and the divorce won't matter because you'll get half of what he earns anyway and really, that's the whole point in playing the

game, get the guy with the most dough."

"That sounds incredibly cynical," Liz weakly told her twice-divorced cousin.

"That sounds realistic," Tiffany said. "There are a million women out there. Three for every guy. It's a box of chocolates and you want them to pick you so you have to be the fanciest, most intriguing truffle in the box."

"Are you *Forest Gump*ing me?"

"Whatever it takes!"

They all nodded, even Marti—her close girlfriend since high school—and Liz felt herself cave.

§

Marti accompanied her to the dermatologist's office. The wizened man with huge dark eyes behind Coke-bottle glasses was not at all like the *Nip/Tuck* actors. Sharp-featured with mud-colored corkscrew hair, olive-complexioned, zero lips to speak of and tiny ears, a face a lower-life-form might admire. He moved furtively, as if he had ADD. She wondered why, if he was such a renowned dermatologist, he didn't take advantage of his own skills.

"No good, no good," Doctor Tod mumbled, examining her skin under a ten-times magnifying glass surrounded by bright LED light that was attached to the reclining clinic chair positioned to nearly prone.

Besides those few words, he only made sounds, like soft moans followed by clicks at the end, as if he was in pain. His breath wasn't the greatest, and Liz held hers.

He poked and prodded and stretched the skin on her face with his fingers and instruments, moaning and clicking softly all the while.

Marti, who had insisted on coming into the exam room to hold Liz's hands, said, "She's not too far gone, is she?"

To which *Doctor Doom*, as Liz was now thinking of the man, moaned and clicked.

Marti patted her hand but Liz couldn't even feel it, she was so

stressed with worry.

Finally, Dr. Tod diagnosed, "Damaged!" in a tone that conveyed blame. His accent was vaguely New England with a Germanic twist, and she began to wonder about his history. He was such an odd duck, like something out of a Grimm's fairytale. "Exposed!" he suddenly snapped, gesturing wildly at her face.

Liz assumed he meant to sunshine. "I, well, a bit, but I wore sunscreen as a child. Mom always made us wear it."

When he said nothing, she added, "The high SPF type."

He scowled, thin lips turning down, and mumbled disdainfully a word that sounded like 'sun' or 'shun' or something she couldn't make out.

"What can you do for her?" Marti asked nervously, as if Liz had gotten a diagnosis of 'terminal'.

"Surgery!" he said unequivocally. "New face." The last tinged with repugnance.

"No!" Liz shook her head. "Not happening!"

A deeper scowl from Dr. Doom, who looked as if he were about to throw up his hands and order her to “Get out!”

"She's afraid of the knife," Marti supplied.

That wasn't strictly true. Liz had undergone dental surgery once to remove two impacted wisdom teeth. She'd recovered quickly and painlessly. And while she had no desire to repeat the experience, she didn't feel fear so much as the logical reaction: why do something so extreme? What's the point? But she did appreciate her friend going to bat for her.

"You mentioned Botox," she said to Marti, who looked hopefully to Dr. Tod.

He gave a quick nod, turning his back on them in dismissal.

"Fills?" Marti asked the back.

He emitted one of those moaning/clicking sounds.

"You need the works," Marti whispered to Liz on their way out of the examination room. "You should have plastic surgery."

"Don't even go there, Marti. I'll do the rest, but not that."

An appointment was arranged for the first of what would turn out to be many regular visits over many months for a variety of

treatments, all administered by the strange Dr. Tod who, with the passing of time, in Liz's eyes, had grown a tad less grotesque, not that he was friendlier than the day she'd met him.

She often wondered if it was the intimacy of the procedures he did on her face that changed her perception of him. He had two assistants who performed facials and other minor treatments on patients, but he always worked on Liz himself. She found that oddly comforting. Or maybe he just felt she needed so much help he couldn't trust anyone else to get it right.

Marti had come with her to the first two appointments, after which Liz was on her own. The peculiar man usually eyed her as if she was a bug pinned to a board. Being in his presence made her shudder at times, especially at the beginning, but the procedures were somewhat invasive and she felt that was likely the underpinnings of her fear.

But oddly, after one year of twice a month visits, she realized she did look better and her skin appeared almost new; the sun damage, the acne scars, the rosacea, the premature wrinkles that had become permanent, all of it had vanished. She also felt more comfortable in his presence. He never said hello, just nodded, waved at the gown to cover her clothes and at the chair. He still said little more than "head," with a gesture to turn one way or the other, but somehow he didn't seem as frightening as before.

She told Marti this over coffee at their favorite cafe.

"It's not so bad. I mean, he gives me a shot of something right away, to calm me down, and that really helps. It's as if I daydream and only wake up at the end. I never even feel the needles. The fills, well, I don't feel them in his office, but later I do, for a day or so."

"Yeah, it's a little like having rubber under the skin," Marti agreed. "I always feel as if I'm wearing a mask on the inside of my face."

"Ugh!"

"You look great, though. I mean, twenty years younger! More. My god, I should go to him myself!"

"I wouldn't say twenty. Maybe ten."

"No, at least twenty."

"Well, I've gained a little weight. Maybe ten pounds. Can you tell?"

"Yes. Looks more like twenty."

"Marti, can you be other than honest for once? Jeez. Maybe closer to twenty. Okay, maybe twenty-five!"

"Well, it doesn't look bad on you."

"You told me a year ago to *lose* ten pounds!"

"That was then. The face makes all the difference. So moon-like, vibrant. Your skin looks so… healthy! You're like a different person. You know, I hardly recognize you at times. It really is as if you've got an entirely new face."

They paused as the waiter brought their coffees.

"But you're more comfortable with him?" Marti said, opening a packet of sugar substitute and stirring it into her single-shot espresso.

"Yes, I am. He's not really friendly, but I appreciate his professionalism."

"You should marry him!"

Liz burned her lip on her latte. "What? Are you out of your mind?"

"He's a doctor. You'd have everything you've ever dreamed of. A husband, kids, a house. Financial security."

"But I'm not attracted to him!"

"You just said you're comfy with him."

"*Comfortable*. In a patient/doctor sense."

"Well, you've spent more time with him than any other man this last year."

Liz knew that was true. Despite all the treatments—and she did look much younger—she hadn't had a date since beginning with Dr. Tod. Of course, she hadn't had a date for half a decade before that either.

To get her friend off the subject, Liz said dismissively, "Marti, I'm sure he's married, so that's that."

"Don't be silly, Liz. Besides, I looked him up in *The American Academy of Dermatology*. There's not a lot of info, but he's single, and from meeting him, I didn't see any indications he's gay. You're

pushing forty. Go after him!"

Liz was appalled. The idea of a romance with Dr. Doom was absurd. But she put an end to it by saying, "Well, I wouldn't know how, even if I was interested, which I'm not."

"Liz, you're so funny! Just be your sweet self. I'm certain he's noticed you by now."

Liz wasn't so sure of that. He was the most aloof man she'd ever encountered. If she'd seen him disembark from a space ship, she wouldn't be surprised."

"Look, here's what you do…" Marti rattled off a list of ways to flirt: "Smile. Make eye contact and hold it. Flip your hair around and play with your jewelry—"

"Oh, that's ridiculous!"

"Trust me, Liz, men like that, they really do. And it's a signal. And you've got to make sure you run into him outside the office."

"How would I do that?"

"Hide outside and follow him."

"Liz, that's stalking!"

"That's planning. And while we're at it, make sure you dress well. You should *always* look good."

Liz groaned. "This is *sooooo* wrong—"

"Smile a lot. Talk to him—"

"He doesn't say much, you know that, just that weirdness that comes out of his mouth and—"

"And make sure you touch him."

"What? That's assault!"

"Oh, Liz, I mean just touch his arm or something as you say 'Thank you!' Men read that as *she wants me*! And don't forget to smile. It's all pheromones. You put them out, he reacts."

"I'm getting a headache," Liz said. Now she was even more appalled. Had women always done this to get a man? No wonder she was single! What had the world come to?

As if reading her mind, Marti said, "Women have always used tricks like this. Once he's interested, well, marriage is right around the corner."

She paused and looked seriously at Liz. "You, my friend, would

be a great candidate for an arranged marriage. Maybe you should visit a professional matchmaker?" Without missing a beat, Marti grinned, "In fact, *I'm* going to arrange things."

A little of the latte Liz held spilled onto the table. "What? No. No! Don't do that, I—"

"I'll have a small dinner party, you and Dr. Toddy, Tiffany and Jim, me and… well, I'll find someone."

"Marti, please, don't—"

Marti grabbed her free hand and said, "Lizzy, give it a chance, okay? See the man in a social setting, outside work. He's probably a very nice guy when he drops the professionalism. Cut him some slack."

A week later Liz reluctantly showed up at Marti's apartment, tightly clutching the neck of a bottle of Chardonnay. Tiffany and Jim had already arrived, and Marti's gay friend Andy was there, but no Dr. Tod.

Fear knotting her stomach, Liz rushed to the kitchen to chill the wine in the refrigerator and try to calm down, but Marti followed her.

"Don't worry, he'll be here," Marti whispered, hugging Liz.

"I'm not worried, I'm *relieved* he's not here."

Suddenly the doorbell rang. "See?" Marti said, giving her another small hug and a wink, and went to answer.

Liz hugged herself and chewed the lipstick off her lower lip. This was such a *very* bad idea. Dr. Tod was not her type at all, although Marti, Tiffany and Phyllis—even her mother when Liz had petitioned her—had all assured her she *had* no type. "Bottom line," Phyllis said, "you can grow to love any man. At least for a while." But Liz didn't think she could ever love Dr. Tod—what the hell was his first name?

She heard Marti introducing him to everyone, then she heard her say, "Oh, come with me. Liz is in the kitchen."

Good God! Liz thought. Panicked, she glanced around, even though she knew there was only one door, no other exit.

Dr. Tod appeared in that doorway behind Marti, at least a head shorter than her friend, who was the same height as Liz. He stood as

if frozen to the spot and just stared at her while Marti chatted away. *Maybe he didn't know I'd be here*, Liz thought, *and this is as awkward and embarrassing and such an obvious setup to him as it is to me.*

"Hello, Dr. Tod," she finally stammered, trying to be gracious.

He gave a perfunctory nod.

"I'll be right back, you two!" Marti chirped, leaving them alone in the kitchen.

Panic rose tsunami-like within her, and Liz side-stepped it and plunged into pseudo-hostess mode. She convinced herself that he was uncomfortable. Even if he wasn't, *she* was.

"It was nice of you to accept Marti's invitation."

His eyes examined her face as they did in the treatment room, the look a bit more pleasant than any she'd seen him provide before. *He's assessing his work*, she thought, disappointed. Even though she wasn't interested in him, still, she had feelings and wanted to be seen as an attractive woman, a desirable person, not as a clinical study. It made her a bit gruff.

"Would you like some wine?" she asked, turning abruptly to the fridge and retrieving the still-warm white wine.

When he didn't answer, she found a corkscrew in the kitchen-implement's drawer and opened the bottle, reached for a glass and then, on impulse, took a second glass and poured wine into both. She picked up the glasses, turned and handed one to him. At first he didn't take it, as if he didn't know what to do with it, but then he reached out and their fingers brushed. His were cool. She sipped the wine from her glass and he watched her as if she were enacting a ritual, which he then imitated.

Liz took a very large swallow of wine and he imitated that as well. Then she finished off the glass, and, after he's done the same, she burst out laughing.

"Dr. Tod, you're a strange man," she said, pouring them both more wine.

"There you are!" Tiffany chirped, entering the kitchen. "Just grabbing the Riesling," she sang, squiggling her way between them to the fridge. "Jim's favorite. Then I'll leave you two alone."

"We're just heading in to the living room," Liz said, moving past

Tiffany and, maybe the wine was getting to her, grabbing Dr. Tod by the hand and pulling him along.

They sat on one of the two couches across from Marti and Andy. Tiffany and Jim had the loveseat. The cream-colored seating surrounded the large glass-and-brass coffee table. The rest of the evening was sometimes pleasant, sometimes awkward chit-chat but, other than that, uneventful. Everyone talked and laughed and joked and ate, everyone but Dr. Tod. He barely responded to the questions they asked, trying to draw him out. He did, though, drink more wine. Liz realized that he was still imitating her, at least with drinking, and she made sure to ply herself with enough *vin* to feel no pain, and hoped Dr. Toddy, as Marti called him, was doing the same.

Tiffany and Jim escaped after dinner with the excuse to "see about the kids". Marti's friend Andy departed. Marti gave Liz a look, yawned and finally said, "I should get my beauty sleep. Tomorrow's a big day at the office."

Liz stood immediately and again Dr. Tod imitated her. He followed her to the door and after Liz and Marti said goodbye and Marti thanked Dr. Tod for coming and he only nodded, Liz led him downstairs.

There were only two cars left in the visitors' parking lot. The green Toyota was hers, the metallic brown Lexus must be his. They got to the Lexus first.

"Well, it's been a pleasure seeing you outside your office," she said with a smile, flipping her hair, wondering if using the word *pleasure* was laying it on too thick. A small moan and click escaped his lips. He scanned her face again and she imagined he was looking for imperfections. As she turned toward her car, slightly off balance from all the wine, suddenly Liz felt something pinch her neck. Instantly, she became dizzy and stumbled. "What the…?" The parking lot came up to meet her.

§

When Liz woke, she had no idea where she was. Not her apartment,

that was for sure. Not even a house. More like a medical clinic, a white-walled, stainless steel room devoid of color. She lay on a gurney and soon pulled herself to a seated position, too fast; her head swam.

Once she'd gained control of her brain, she glanced around. This looked like an operating room! Many pieces of equipment were familiar and replicated those in Dr. Tod's office. She was dressed in only a hospital gown the color of dirt.

One wall held a windowless door and gradually she eased off the gurney and stood, holding on for support. The room was cool, the stainless steel cold on her fingers, the floor icy against the soles of her feet. She grabbed the thin brown blanket at the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. Despite feeling empty-headed, Liz forced herself to move to the door, expecting it to be locked, but it was not.

She felt weak but not about to faint. If anything, she was confused, not sure how she'd gotten to what was apparently a medical facility of some sort, not knowing what was the matter with her.

She wandered down a short hallway and headed toward a door at the far end. Halfway there, she came to a window and gasped at her reflection. Fear surged and a hand flew to her forehead. Only her eyes, nostrils and lips were visible; the rest of her head was bandaged. "What happened to me?" she whispered. Could she have been in an accident? Many questions, no answers, no memory of how she'd gotten here and into this state.

As the panic cranked down a notch, her eyes refocused and she saw the room within. It was a nursery, full of incubators, three of which formed a circle in the center of the room. Each held a newborn wrapped in a pink baby blanket, hooked up with many tubes to various equipment some of which she could identify, like the blood pressure monitors and the respirators. She had no idea what was going on but instinctively opened the door next to the window and went in.

She moved into the middle of the circle, surrounded by the three incubators; each of these infants was extremely tiny, more so

than the newborns she'd seen, like Tiffany's four. These babies were easily one quarter their size, and swaddled completely so that even their faces were covered, as if they needed exceptional warmth in this dimly-lit room. She guessed these were preemies, hooked up by many tubes and wires to the machinery keeping them alive until they could mature enough to survive on their own. *Whose babies are these?* she wondered. She glanced around but there didn't seem to be any cameras monitoring these little ones, as if they'd been left to their own devices, as she had been.

She reached through the incubator's sleeve to one of the babies and her hand slid into the latex glove at the other end. For some reason, she just had to see what they looked like. Gingerly, she unwrapped the blanket from the face.

And jerked her hand away with a gasp! "No! This can't be!"

Quickly she unwrapped the faces of the other two infants. They were identical, their features distinct even at what must be just days, maybe only hours of life. Every one resembled Dr. Tod! Except for one thing: the antennae. The mechanoreceptors at the tips were all turned toward *her*!

This is insane! she thought. Her mind couldn't grasp it. *What were these insectoid creatures?* She found a chair by the door and sat trembling, struggling to get her bearings. And suddenly realized that her body was different. She was much lighter, as if she had lost a lot of weight. She pressed the gown against her stomach—it flattened! The thirty pounds she'd gained over the last year were gone!

Realization of the more than possible, the *probable* crashed over her. She worked with insects and knew quite a bit about them. *Viviparous* roaches grow their eggs within the *ootheca* sac inside the uterus of the mother, surrounded by fluid. Just like mammals! And they recognize their mother. These were *her* babies and they had recognized her! And now she knew why she had never been conscious during the treatments with Dr. Tod. He'd given her a knock-out drug and raped her. Probably many times.

Revulsion overtook her and she bent to vomit but the heaving was dry, bringing up nothing, and finally she pulled herself up and

sucked in air to get control. Either she was crazy and imagining all this, or it had happened—and the reality before her felt ultra-real.

In a panic, she peered again at her reflection in the window. Terrified but determined, she unwrapped the bandage covering her head. With quivering fingers she peeled away layers of gauze until she reached the final layer. Even before she removed it, she could see that her face was different now, not the smooth, even lines that had been sculpted and shaped by Dr. Tod over twelve months. And the color beneath the gauze was two-toned, pale and dark.

Liz took a deep, rattled breath; she had to know.

She unwound the last layer of bandage and screamed, waking the babies, who also screamed and cried. "My face! My face!" Behind her, Dr. Tod's image appeared, so like those babies, so insectoid.

She spun around, shrieking, "What have you done?"

Expressionless as always, he seemed unperturbed. A little moan. A small click. His almost non-existent lips might have turned up in a smile and released a word that sounded like "Beautiful!"

"What have you done to my face?" she screamed.

He gestured toward the babies. She shook her head, confused, unable to comprehend the incomprehensible.

"Food," he moaned matter-of-factly, clicking insect-like.

"Food," she repeated dumbly. And then understood why he'd created the 'normal' face—one that did not disgust him as much, one rich in healthy, youthful, nutritious tissue. Why he'd brought her to his lair to give birth to his spawn. Why he'd stripped away pieces of that normal mask she'd worn for the last year and left this face with patches of skin removed.

Horror descended on her and she thought she would faint but instead found the path to madness welcoming and headed rapidly down it. Dr. Tod gripped her arm and led her back to the incubators.

"Hungry," he said, moaning, clicking, gesturing toward the hideous, screaming things in the incubators, their antenna waving frantically in her direction. His offspring. Her offspring. Insects with human features.

He used a tweezer-like instrument to pull a new strip of flesh from her cheek, and she did not feel any pain; she felt nothing. He

shred it into three small parts and began feeding the first of the demon newborns.

§

Liz watches the infant consume a part of her, watches from this new, safe place within her, abstractly fascinated, buried beneath a core shock from which she knows she is irretrievable. She recognizes that he is an entirely different species, ancient, one predating human existence. A creature devoid of human emotions and concerns, that has evolved to live among us, breeding with pheromone-producing human females in order to survive. But to what end?

As she stares at the tiny being devouring her skin she numbly wonders, *Will they eat just this perfect face he's created or will they also demand the less-than-perfect flesh from my body? Does it matter?*

As Marti predicted, Liz now has everything she's wanted—a husband, children… *This must be the good life*, she thinks. *A life that will no doubt be short.*

Tiffany was right after all. Like females, males of every species know what they want. At last she is perfect in someone's eyes.

Cousin Phyllis had said, 'You can grow to love any man, at least for a while.' *Even a man who is not a man*?

She takes the last strip of her skin from his twitchy hand. "I'll do it," she says, and begins to feed one of her daughters, whose antennae wave longingly in her direction.

Down at the Bottom of Everything

E.R. Knightsbridge

I always run the bath too deep. I get in and submerge my entire body so that my face looks up from under a veil of someone else's tears. And I stay there until the water presses down on my ribcage and fills my ears and everything starts to go black. Then my body saves itself and I sit up gasping for air.

I don't do it because I like it; I do it because I have to. Because I have to beat the water, so that I am not scared to turn on the tap or leave the house when it rains or walk across a bridge or get on a tiny boat with my wife for a day-excursion on holiday.

I do it because if I didn't, I'd be too frightened to live and I might as well have died in that knotted swarm of noiselessly waving plastic in the Pacific Ocean.

I was there as a researcher looking at environmental damage, there to see the floating islands of waste. It was darker than I'd expected under the endless raft of disposed bottles and old mobile phone packaging.

I switched on the underwater light on my helmet, and it lit up flecks of the sea like dust in the light between curtains. It was silent down there, except for the gushing release of air from my tank. At first I imagined I could hear sonar radars pinging back and forth, but the sounds were only the ghosts of expectation filling in the gaps of the unknown.

Then I noticed my legs were caught on something. I kicked and kicked, expecting to set myself free but there was a raggedy stretch of police tape tangled around my right ankle, tethering me there. When I reached down to loosen myself, pain shot through my arm the minute my finger touched the tape. It was as if someone had stabbed a blunt pencil right through my hand. And in that moment of sheer pain, of distilled stinging, I saw flashes of an enormous, endless sea that ranged from dark black to translucent turquoise.

In some places it was frothy, bubbling with movement and in others it was almost perfectly still, tingling with tiny ripples from birds' feet. I was looking down on it from above, swooping in to see the dreaded details. The ocean covered everything; mountains were made of cascading water, valleys were transparent rock pools and at the very edges of the horizon a solid wall of water formed a roaring barrier from the bottom of nowhere to the top of infinity. It made a sound like a perpetually revving engine that grew stronger and louder with every exhalation of power. The water-wall glistened orange and yellow from a dying sun and schools of fish looked like colored ribbons waving in the wind.

I was in a shimmering, iridescent world of seeping hues, as though my eyes were covered in the colors oil makes in a puddle. For a few seconds I was the happiest I'd ever been. Suddenly the door to the vision snapped shut and I was left trapped in an invisible sphere, spinning round in a ball of underwater fury there in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. A giant crab floated past me, disorientated and fat. When it reached touching distance it burst into a gruesome firework of vicious tiny crabs the size of fingernails. Agony immediately pricked my back, but it was pinpointed and specific, as though a bird with one claw had latched onto me. I heard a nightingale sing yet lacked the energy or time to realize I'd created it for myself.

The crabs were under my skin. I knew it as I knew the lines of my mother's face; a dead certainty, an unavoidable, terrifying and comforting truth.

The burning sensation was positioned exactly over the top of a mole on my back that I got from falling asleep on an LA roof terrace 20 years ago but which then began crawling up my spine, dancing over my shoulders until it dragged itself onto my right hand. The pain I experienced in that moment broke me in a way that was obvious would be impossible to ever fix. I screamed into my breathing mask, as if maybe I had another self inside me that would come to the rescue and overpower the weaker me I've been carrying around inside my ribcage all of my life. By the time I'd roared all the air from my lungs, the pain had disappeared and the mole had

hunkered down in its new and clearly visible spot. Even in the middle of the exhausted relief I felt when that pain was over, I could not escape one chilling thought: the mole would always be there, taunting me in clear view, waiting for me to pass my eyes over it when I reached for a pen or flushed the toilet. It would ask me every day if I was brave enough to remember what had happened.

I was so ashamed of my own pre-emptive cowardice that it took me a few moments to register that the only thing I could see all around me was blue. Not the blue of the sea, but the generic blue of a grocery-store bag.

My breathing mask had gone. The plastic bag over my head hovered around me like a determined jellyfish and then began forcing itself into my mouth, burrowing down my esophagus.

I was simultaneously being suffocated by nature and by one of the very things I'd been nurtured into needing. I was a fire inside an oven, I was the barbed wire eyed by a sniper's eyes from the tower of a high security prison. I was a fake flower wrapped in cellophane, too, and a fan rotating robotically in the bedroom of a house blasted by a tornado. I was at once all of these things and more. I contained so many objects, vistas and strangers' memories that my skin felt stretched too tight.

As it tried to choke me, I understood it was not just a plastic bag but an entity.

It didn't speak any language I knew, or one I could ever hope to repeat, but it began burning me with a searing energy that communicated all of its anger, resentment and fear. It transferred all of its emotions past my eyes and ears and into my gut so that they trapped me like the solid water walls in my vision.

Its feelings towered over me until I was crushed in their clenched grip, they squeezed through my skin and became my own thoughts; "… endless floating. In a place that doesn't exist to most living people… so little consequence that I can be tortured by time and the sun and the stinging salt water… I will never die, I will cling on forever to remind you people of permanence but I will do it in silence, a long way away so that the glimpses you catch of me will puncture you as they have today."

I'm lying in the bath now. I've got a big rock I found on the beach when I was ten on my chest. I saw the mole on my hand when I placed it there. The rock helps to keep me under the water. I'm trebling but I know I have to do it.

I must win.

Spore

Amanda Downum

"I got it from my girlfriend," the boy says. "Ex-girlfriend." Color rises in his light brown cheeks. "Wow, that makes it sound bad."

I shift in the unforgiving molded plastic chair, fighting a sigh and winning—just. My face feels awkward, as though my sympathetic-interviewer expression is about to tilt and slide off. I glance toward the window, but the glass gives nothing back. Outside the study room are tables littered with stray books, students with earbuds sprouting from their skulls, and the cramped rows of bound periodicals in the library basement. A fluorescent tube flickers in one corner.

I force my attention away from the soporific stutter of the light and back to the boy. Which isn't fair—he's only a few years younger than me, the second half of his twenties. My notes say he's a grad student in Religious Studies, that his name is Aaron. I don't know if that's true, but he answers to it. He wears a worn tweed sport coat over a T-shirt for a band I've never heard of.

I should never have let Dora talk me into this ridiculous project.

Put your tits on, woman. Get this over with. "Where did she first come into contact with it?"

"I don't know. She never talked about it." He takes his glasses off for the third time, rubs the bridge of his nose. This time he folds them and sets them on the table out of fidgeting range. He looks everywhere but the little digital recorder on the table between us. Because he's lying, or because he's telling the truth? "She didn't talk about a lot of things. It wasn't a relationship based on trust and open communication. I probably should have figured that out sooner."

"How did you know you'd been exposed?"

His cheeks flush the color of cinnamon. "It started with weird spots. And the dreams. I didn't connect them at first. I went to the clinic. The doctor said it was a superficial mycosis and gave me

antifungals. Before I started them, Dora—Dr. Muñoz—showed up. I didn't believe her, but she knew about the dreams. Things I hadn't told anyone. She introduced me to some of the others."

"Were you scared?" Not what I mean to ask, but it slips out anyway.

"I still am. But—I don't mean to sound all support-group here, but it's true—I'm not alone. Not just the way counselors say you're not alone. I can feel the others, like white noise in the back of my head. I know how that sounds," he says with a grimace, making a vague woo-woo gesture.

He leans forward, squinting as he catches my eye. "You don't really believe me, do you?"

"No." The flickering light is giving me a headache. "Which doesn't mean it isn't true," I add, a half-hearted sop toward professionalism. "But you're not the only person Dor—Dr. Muñoz asked me to talk to. Maybe I'll understand it better after I've spoken with everyone else."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm an anthropologist. Recording stories is part of my job. Dr. Muñoz thought this would interest me." Dora always joked that I became an anthropologist to learn how to talk to humans. We both knew it wasn't really a joke.

"Good luck." Aaron reaches for his glasses, and his myopic black eyes sharpen as he studies me. "Maybe I'll see you again."

§

That night I sit cross-legged on a hard hotel mattress, squinting at the transcript on my laptop. The recorder lies on the fantastically ugly floral bedspread, feeding Aaron's words back to me. My own words, distorted and strange coming from outside my skull. I grimace at the catch in my voice when I said Dora's name.

I never should have agreed to this. Never mind that Dora is paying for my travel expenses, that I was sick of ramen and job-hunting and staring down my student loans, and would have leapt at any excuse to get out my stifling apartment. Never mind that I

still wake up horny and lonely more than a year after Dora left, or that I've only had a handful of dates or one-night stands since.

Not that I had so many more before Dora. But then the inevitable end of every relationship rarely bothered me. Maybe I missed the sex, or someone to split the bills with, but the person— I hadn't really known how to miss someone, before Dora.

Oxytocin. Dopamine. Nothing but chemicals. Quitting smoking was easier than quitting Dora Muñoz.

I never should have agreed, because Dora is crazy. The kind of passionate manic brilliance it's too easy to get caught up in. She took trips at a moment's notice—South America, Asia—chasing after weird plants or fungus that might be the cure for cancer, or impotence, or the common cold. I envied her that—not the travel, but the drive. The way her eyes lit up when she caught a scent. Too often the trails led nowhere, though, and eventually funding dried up. But not Dora's passion. Until one day she vanished after a lead and never came home. I received a stream of e-mails, then a trickle, then nothing except enough money to break our lease, and one final message telling me she was going off the grid. Leaving me to pack up her stuff and explain things to her friends and colleagues, most of whom proceeded to tiptoe around me like I was a widow, or like her crazy might have rubbed off on me.

That should have been my cue to move on with my life. But then came a string of cryptic e-mails and invitations. A trail of breadcrumbs for me to follow like a lost child. And here I am.

§

"What is this, like *Humans of New York*?" The girl named Anne drags on her American Spirit, taps ash onto her empty saucer. We're well within fifteen feet of the café's front door, but no one has told her to stop yet.

I smile, like I haven't heard that a hundred times since I decided to do a photographic census as my thesis project. "Something like that. I'll listen to your story, if you want to tell it." The sun creeps slowly across the sidewalk, pushing the shade away from our table.

Sweat beads on the back of my neck, and the dregs of my iced latte melt into milky translucence.

Blue eyes narrow behind a curl of smoke. Wary, intense. Anne doesn't fidget the way Aaron did, but this is her third cigarette. She lifts long brown hair off her neck one-handed and blows a stream of smoke into the sky. She smells of tobacco and cinnamon and espresso.

"I got the caps at a party. I'd never met the guy before. He cornered me and my roommate and started talking about human consciousness and interspecies communication. Pretty interesting stuff, actually. I thought he just wanted in our pants, but at least he was entertaining. He gave me a bag of mushrooms. Said they'd give me a new perspective. I'd heard all that before, but he didn't even ask for my number.

"The next night my roommate and I took them. She got sick early on, puked her guts out. Didn't bother me, though. It was… a weird trip. Not bad. Intense. I spent what felt like three hours lying on the living room floor wondering if I'd ever be straight again." She stabs her cigarette out amidst scattered muffin crumbs. "Turns out I won't."

"Did you ever find the guy from the party again?"

"I dream about him sometimes. Whatever this is, he's further along than I am."

The sigh wins this time. I blame the smell of tobacco and a night of restless sleep. "So, what? This is… an alien parasite? A psychic fungus?"

Anne's lips thin. Pale, shimmery lip gloss leaves an iridescent sheen on her cigarette butts. "I don't give a fuck if you think I'm crazy, but Dora said I should talk to you. Am I wasting my time, Dr. Jernigan?"

"I— I don't know. I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound like an asshole. I just don't understand this. For all I know this is an elaborate joke. And if you're going to yell at me, call me Beth." Damn it, Beth. Don't flirt with the crazy psychic fungus lady.

"If it is a joke, I'm not in on it." Anne's narrow face rearranges itself, finally settling into a strained smile. "And you bought me

coffee, so I guess I'm not wasting my time. I don't have many other people I can talk about this with."

Silence settles over the table. I turn my glass in careful circles. Condensation drips through the weave of the metal table onto the pavement. People pass us on the sidewalk, bright summer colors and chattering voices. Hands touch arms to punctuate conversation; shoulders brush; a couple rests their hands in each other's back pockets. The little things humans do to keep the chemicals flowing, to fool themselves into believe they're not alone.

If Anne and Aaron are telling the truth, what makes their supposed connection any different?

"Have you considered taking anything? Antifungals?"

Anne laughs, bitter and tobacco-roughened. "I've thought of taking a lot of things. Hell, I've thought of throwing myself off a roof, or in front of a train. My life wasn't so great, but it was *my* fucking life. I'll never get that back. But sometimes the dreams feel so good…"

§

Another night, another city, another hotel bed—inoffensively ugly this time, bland blues and browns. The muted television throws light across the walls. My phone sits on the nightstand, also silent. I broke and texted Dora two hours ago. Still no response.

She's fucking with me. That's the easiest answer. It would justify my anger, let me go home and forget this. Forget her.

Because that worked so well last time.

You'll meet someone else, a classmate told me once, on a rare occasion when I shared something personal, bitterness over some breakup. I don't even remember with whom anymore. She meant it to reassure, but it left me feeling ill.

Of course I would meet someone else. The world is teeming with humans; you can't avoid meeting them. Some of them are lonely and searching, and see the same in you. So you fumble for connection all over again, hoping that this time it will stick. That this time will be worth it.

Dora was hardly the first to see how hard connections were for me. But instead of being angry or hurt or determined to fix me, it engaged her scientific curiosity. I felt like an alien anthropologist in any relationship; with Dora, I didn't have to pretend otherwise. Was that love?

I roll over, pressing my face into the musty, starch-stiff pillow. My thighs slide together and my pulse throbs softly in my labia. The taste of coffee lingers on the back of my tongue, reminding me of cinnamon and the sheen of lip gloss. I could masturbate until I fall asleep, but I know I'll think of Dora.

One more day. I have my bus ticket for tomorrow. One more of these ridiculous trips. Then I'm done.

§

"I had cancer." The woman named Minette shifts in the booth, tracing nicks and gouges and old graffiti on the wooden table. Hands like white spiders, lovely and unsettling. "After the first mastectomy— It was awful, but it was over. Done. I'd survived. Then we found the new tumor, and I ran out of rope."

Late-morning sun angles through windows dull with grime, seeping between chipped paint and faded flyers to stripe the battered tabletop. Dust motes spiral in the lazy air. Daylight lends the Angels' Share a lonely, abandoned feeling.

"I met a woman. I don't remember where. I saw so many 'alternative health professionals'." She makes lopsided air quotes. "I tried so many things. I was about to give up when I met her. She gave me a little bag of mushrooms. She said they weren't a cure— she said that over and over until she was sure I understood. It wasn't a cure, but it would help the pain."

"Did it?" My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. The bottles behind the bar shine in the dusty light. I didn't bother with the recorder this time.

Minette smiles, dark-flecked hazel eyes creasing beneath long translucent lashes. Delicate bones stark beneath too little flesh, pale skin tinged nearly blue. Her hair is a colorless stubble that looks soft

as suede. She's dying; that, like her fragile hands, is beautiful and unnerving all at once.

"It did more than that."

"It's not that I don't want to believe you." I shake my head. "All right, maybe it is. But I don't. I can't.

"I understand." Minette slides a plastic bag across the table. "Dora asked me to give you this. She wanted to see you, but she had to leave too early."

I trace one dry, gray-brown tendril carefully through the plastic. "Is this what you took?"

"Yes." She pulls herself out of the booth while I'm still searching for a reply. "Can I get you anything? On the house."

I draw a breath to decline, but fuck it. "Bourbon. Neat." I follow her, leaning against the bar while she takes down a bottle. "Dora wants me to eat these?"

"She said to tell you that it doesn't have to be permanent. You can get treatment after one dose. But it will be enough for the dreams." She sets a glass in front of me. Liquor catches the light, sending a wash of amber over the polished wood. Saliva pools on my tongue.

"After the surgery it was so hard to look at myself in the mirror. I felt like a freak. But now I feel beautiful again. Look."

She turns away and grabs the hem of her T-shirt in both hands, peels it slowly over her head. I swallow, staring at the pale curve of her back. Her vertebrae are a string of pearls under her skin, the shadows beneath her scapulae like folded wings. My pulse sharpens as she turns back.

Her right breast is pale, pink-nippled and blue-veined, small but sagging gently without a bra. The remains of a scar stretch from sternum to armpit where her left once was, hidden now by a tattoo —

No. Not a tattoo.

Whorls of fungus grow from the scar's pink seam, fruiting bodies curling together like rose petals. Ghost white at the center, shading into yellow and teal toward the edges.

I open my mouth, dry tongue peeling off my palate, but no

sound comes out. I lift my glass with a numb hand. The whiskey burns all the way down my throat, dissolving all the stillborn things I might have said.

Minette watches, something that might be disappointment narrowing the corners of her eyes. Finally she nods and tugs her shirt back on. "I understand. I need to open the bar. Come back later if you have more questions."

I've hurt her, but I don't know how to take it back. Instead I turn like a coward and walk away.

§

That night I stand naked in front of the steam-clouded mirror, the carpet of this latest hotel room rough and tacky beneath my feet. My hair drips down my shoulders and goosebumps roughen my legs.

The bag waits on the bedside table. If I take its contents, where will fruiting bodies sprout on me? Will it grow through my skin like lace?

Leave, I tell myself. Take a taxi to the airport and go home.

Home to what? An ordinary life of work and debt and fleeting relationships. Recording the faces and stories of strangers, because that illusory connection is stronger than any lasting interaction. More than one ex-girlfriend told me I need therapy—I can't discount that possibility, but I always resisted. Just because I'm not like you doesn't make me broken. Does it?

The bag is nearly weightless. Dull and gray at first glance, but colors linger in the creases, hints of blue and creamy yellow. They would photograph beautifully up close, but the light is bad.

I tried psilocybin once in undergrad. Aside from passing nausea and belching mushrooms for an hour, it was a pleasant evening. The friend who gave it to me promised a life-altering experience, though, and a few hours of pretty lights and floating hadn't delivered.

Maybe that's all this will be. Or maybe it will turn me into some sort of fungus zombie.

I could play this up, make a ceremony out of it, but that would only make me feel sillier. Before I can vacillate any more, I tear open

the bag and lay the largest stem on my tongue.

Damn it, Dora.

Dry, rubbery, bitter and cloyingly organic, like earth and decay. My face contorts as I chew. I wash it down with a glass of sour tap water and belch. Then, lacking any better ideas, I turn off the lights and lie down on the bed.

I try not to watch the clock, but it's the brightest thing in the room. Heat fills my stomach. Twenty-two minutes in, my face feels numb. At thirty-five I can't feel my feet, and my arms tingle. The clock face brightens into brilliant emerald lines. I watch them change, certain a message will form.

The message is: *you've been staring at a clock in a dark room for forty-seven minutes. Because you're on drugs.*

The electric hum of the clock envelopes me. Patterns swim behind my eyes, lingering when I open them. Every noise outside is too sharp, ominous. I remind myself that I'm naked every time I think of running outside to confront them.

I drag my nails across the bedspread to study the sound, shift my heels to marvel at the sensation of calluses on rough fabric. I don't know how long I've been drifting when the realization fills me: I'm not alone.

The darkness and its shifting lattice of color doesn't change, but I feel a weight in the room, the gravity of another presence. If I sat up I might see someone there, but my head is too heavy to lift.

'Hello, Beth," Dora says.

And damn it all, my brain produces happy chemicals at the sound of her voice. "What is this thing? A parasite? A symbiote?"

A soft snort of breath, not quite a sigh. A familiar sound that means I've got something wrong. "Any relationship between two organisms is symbiosis," she says. "It can be parasitic or mutualistic or commensal. In this case, it can be all of the above."

What were we? I want to ask. "Does it kill you?"

"Everything kills you eventually, love. Playing host can shorten a human lifespan, yes. It varies. But in return the fungus takes you into the web. Our memories, our identities—maybe our souls, if you believe in that—are incorporated into a greater whole. They've

spored a hundred worlds, encountered thousands of cultures. They've seen and preserved things humans can only dream of. They're historians. Archivists. I'll live forever within the colony. Learn forever. Long after every human civilization has fallen to dust."

That old familiar passion suffuses her voice. As always, I envy it.

"How many of these cultures have been archived willingly?"

"More than you might think. Hell, some worship the colony. I don't think that matters to it, though. Like so many relationships, if the practical benefits aren't enough there's a chemical reward to keep you invested."

The dreams feel so good. Yes. Yes they do. "Serotonin. Dopamine. Endogenous opioids." I was a runner once, years ago. I remember how sweet those can be.

"Yes. They make us nervous, those chemicals. We fall into the puritanical trap of believing that anything that feels good must be wrong somehow."

"Will it feel so good that I'll throw myself off a roof to spread the infection?"

"The urge may present itself. They're not *O. unilateralis*, Beth. We're not ants. We can make our own decisions."

I don't know about that—how many people live their entire lives reacting to chemical stimulus and never understanding why?

"Why?" The word echoes from my brain off my tongue. "Why did you bring me here?"

"To spread the infection, silly." I hear the laugh in her voice, imagine her dark eyes crinkling at the corners. "Because I thought you would appreciate the opportunity, or at least have the capacity to. And because I miss you."

"Where are you?" I grope across the bed, searching for warmth, but find nothing.

"With the colony. I said the timeline varies—mine was short. I pushed. I wanted to see more, so the fungus grew faster. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late to reverse. I wish I could have seen you again, but I wouldn't do anything differently."

Of course not. Dora isn’t a creature made for regret.

Maybe that's what I envy most about her.

§

I stumble back to the Angels' Share the next night. Not quite literally, but gravity isn't working the way it should. Lights are still too bright, oversaturated. Minette only nods and sets a double bourbon in front of me before returning to the regulars. A quiet night, a handful of people at the bar, a couple in a booth across the room. I huddle in a corner, engrossed in the texture of the table, the light reflecting off rows of bottles.

When all the patrons are gone and the chairs put up, Minette returns.

"I'm sorry," I mutter into my empty glass like a coward, before forcing myself to meet her eyes. It's hard to focus—I haven't eaten anything since before the mushrooms. "I didn't mean—"

"Hush." She takes my hand and draws me up. "You look rough. Stay here tonight."

She leads me down a narrow hall in the back, up a flight of stairs. At the top of the steps something changes—her arms slide around me, or mine around her. Her mouth is sticky-sweet, her fragile hands surprisingly strong. She draws away after a long, tangling kiss, both of us breathless. Her eyes gleam in the shadows as she watches me, waiting.

"Yes," I whisper, reaching for her.

We fumble through a dark room and onto a bed that smells like her—sweet, musky, earthen. I'm wet before she tugs my jeans off. One cool hand slides into my bra; the other slips between my legs. I come hard a minute later, gasping, and she laughs.

I pause as I ease her shirt up, and feel her answering tension.

"It's not that," I say. Here in the dark, it's the truth. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

Her skin is cool, roughening as I trail kisses down her ribs. Her breath catches as I make my way back up, to what used to be her left

breast.

Cooler than her flesh, and not quite softer, silken and rubbery at the same time. She moans as I run my tongue along the edge of one whorl. Her back arches and the swirl of ridges spreads, opening to my touch. They taste of earth and cinnamon.

Later, I drift awake to Minette spooning against me. Her fingers trace patterns on my shoulders, drawing constellations amid the freckles.

"I won't be here much longer," she murmurs. Her breath ruffles the fine hair on my nape. "But the bar will be. If you need a place—"

I make a noncommittal noise into the pillow and nestle closer. Sleep takes me again before I find an answer.

§

I dream of being cradled in a rosebud, curled tight like a baby waiting to be born. Dora is beside me in the dark. At first it's just her familiar presence, but then images unfurl in the darkness.

She hangs amid a web of soft organic tissue. Shelves and curling fronds and spiraling embroidered ribbons of fungus. Growth like creamy lace sprouts from her skin, envelops her like a bridal gown. She's as beautiful as ever. She smiles at me, and something stirs in response beneath my skin. For once, I'm not alone.

§

Two weeks later I wake to find Minette gone. The keys to the bar rest on the nightstand, on top of a folded note. I don't need to read it to know what's happened.

I sit on the edge of the bed in the curtained gloom, trying to identify that thorny, prickling sensation behind my sternum. Almost grief, but I know that's foolish. I'll dream of her tonight, after all.

§

A week after that, I'm polishing the bar one lazy afternoon when the

door chimes. A draft of sticky August heat pushes past the AC.

A young man steps in, squinting against the shadows. He runs a hand through his black curls and adjusts clunky black-framed glasses on the bridge of his nose. He blinks when he recognizes me.

"Dr. Jernigan. Nice to see you again."

"Aaron." His discomfiture makes me smile. But I should probably be nice; we'll know each other a long time. "Call me Beth."

Pippa's Crayons

Christine Morgan

"What are you drawing, honey?"

"Pictures."

"Can I see? Oh, how nice. Is this your house?"

"Nuh-unh. Is a farmhouse."

"A farmhouse, yes, I see that… this must be the barn… and what kind of crops are these?"

"Corns."

"Such tall corn, too. As high as the roof. Do you like corn, Pippa?"

"Not that kind."

"No? What kind do you like? Corn on the cob? Popcorn? Cornbread?"

"Not that corns! That corns is ucky."

"Ucky? It's so green—"

"No! It's ucky. It's sick-making corns."

"What about these things with the… wiggly bits?"

"Them's carrots."

"Let's look at your next picture, shall we? Oh… how… pretty… is this a garden? What kind of flowers are these?"

"I dunno."

"Have you seen flowers like that, honey? Flowers that… color?"

"I dunno."

"I didn't know we had glow-in-the-dark crayons here in the art room."

"My crayons. My grampy sended them."

"Your grampy… your grandfather, Mr. Pierce? Is this his farm?"

"Nuh-unh. Look, see, I drawed some cows, and some sheeps, and a horsie."

"… which ones are the cows?"

"These ones!"

"And this picture is the house again, but what happened to the corn and carrots? They're all grey."

"They's turning into dirt."

"Dirt?"

"Rock-dirt, all dusty."

"Whose face is this in the window?"

"The farmer lady."

"She looks happy, smiling like that."

"She's screaming. The farmer man made her go stay in the attic."

"That doesn't sound very nice of the farmer man."

"She was crazy-crazy. And look, I drawed another one, now there's a crazy boy in the attic too. But this other one, this boy, he falled down the well."

"Was he hurt when he fell down the well?"

"He died."

"He drowned?"

"The water was ucky. He died. His little brother died too. See, I drawed their bones in the well. Aminal bones too."

"Animal bones?"

"Aminals. Here's a bunny-bunny. Here's a bird."

"And what happened to the animals in this next picture? They're grey like the corn. Are they also turning into dust?"

"Uh-huh."

"This one… are they having a barbecue?"

"They was gonna eat the pig but it was ucky too. That's why they gots yuck faces with their tongues stuck out, yuck."

"I see them making yuck faces. Oh, and you've got some more pictures here… what… Pippa, honey, what's this one?"

"It's the farmer lady again!"

"She's…"

"She's all the colors!"

"Yes… the colors… Pippa, I've never seen colors like that."

"My grampy did."

"Your grampy saw colors like that?"

"They comed out of a rock."

"A rock?"

"A rock falled down from the sky and there was stuff in it and the stuff comed out and it was all the colors."

"Then what did your grampy do?"

"He killed the farmer lady, and the house falled down on the farmer man."

"What do you mean, your grampy killed the farmer-lady?"

"He did. Then he bringed the doctor and other mens, and allllll the colors comed out of the well and went waaaaay high back up in the sky."

"Is that… is that what this picture is? The colors… coming out of the well… going up into the sky, into space?"

"Except a little bit falled back down."

"Fell back down like the rock did?"

"Uh-huh! And that's what my grampy made my crayons from."

The Wreck of the *Charles Dexter Ward*

Sarah Monette and Elizabeth Bear

Part One

Six weeks into her involuntary tenure on Faraday Station, Cynthia Feuerwerker needed a job. She could no longer afford to be choosy about it, either; her oxygen tax was due, and you didn't have to be a medical doctor to understand the difficulties inherent in trying to breathe vacuum.

You didn't have to be, but Cynthia was one. Or had been, until the allegations of malpractice and unlicensed experimentation began to catch up with her. As they had done, here at Faraday, six weeks ago. She supposed she was lucky that the crew of the boojum-ship *Richard Trevithick* had decided to put her off here, rather than just feeding her to their vessel—but she was having a hard time feeling the gratitude. For one thing, her medical skills had saved both the ship and several members of his crew in the wake of a pirate attack. For another, they'd confiscated her medical supplies before dumping her, and made sure the whole of the station knew the charges against her.

Which was a death sentence too, and a slower one than going down the throat of a boojum along with the rest of the trash.

So it was cold desperation that had driven Cynthia here, to the sharp side of this steel desk in a rented station office, staring into the face of a bald old Arkhamer whose jowls quivered with every word he spoke. His skin was so dark she could just about make out the patterns of tattoos against the pigment, black on black-brown.

"Your past doesn't bother me, Doctor Feuerwerker," he said. His sleeves were too short for his arms, so five centimeters of fleshy wrist protruded when he gestured. "I'll be very plain with you. We have need of your skills, and there is no guarantee any of us will be returning from the task we need them for."

Cynthia folded her hands over her knee. She had dropped a few credits on a public shower and a paper suit before the interview, but anybody could look at her haggard face and the bruises on her elbows and tell she'd been sleeping in maintenance corridors.

"You mentioned this was a salvage mission. I understand there may be competition. Pirates. Other dangers."

"No to mention the social danger of taking up with an Arkhamer vessel."

"If I stay here, I face the social danger of an airlock. I am a good doctor, Professor Wandrei. I wasn't stripped of my license for any harm to a patient."

"No-oo," he agreed, drawing it out. She knew he must have her CV in his heads-up display. "But rather, for seeking after forbidden knowledge."

She shrugged and gestured around the rented office. "Galileo and Derleth and Chen sought forbidden knowledge, too. That got us this far." Onto a creaky, leaky, Saturn-orbit station that stank of ammonia despite exterminators working double shifts to keep the toves down. She watched his eyes and decided to take a risk. "An Arkhamer Professor ought to be sympathetic to that."

Wandrei's lips were probably lush once, but years and exposure to the radiation that pierced inadequately shielded steelships had left them lined and dry. Despite that, and the jowls, and the droop of his eyelids, his homely face could still rearrange itself beautifully around a smile.

Cynthia waited long enough to be sure he wouldn't speak before adding, "You know I don't have any equipment."

"We have some supplies. And the vessel we're going to salvage is an ambulance ship, the *Charles Dexter Ward*. You should be able to procure everything you need aboard it. In my position as a senior officer of the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*, I am prepared to offer you a full share of the realizations from the salvage expedition, as well as first claim on any medical goods or technology."

Suspicion tickled Cynthia's neck. "What else do you expect to find aboard an ambulance, Professor?"

"Data," he said. "Research. The *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* is an

archive ship."

Next dicey question: "What happened to your ship's surgeon?"

"Aneurysm," he said. "She was terribly young, but it took her so fast—there was nothing anyone could do. She'd just risen from apprentice, and hadn't yet taken one of her own. We'll get another from a sister ship eventually—but there's not another Arkhamer vessel at Faraday now, or within three days' travel, and we'll lose the salvage if we don't act immediately."

"How many shares in total?" A full share sounded good—until you found out the salvage rights were divided ten thousand ways.

"A full share is one percent," he said.

No self-discipline in space could have kept Cynthia from rocking back in her chair—and self-discipline had never been her strong point. It was too much. This was a trap.

Even just one percent of the scrap rights of a ship like that would be enough to live on frugally for the rest of her days. With her pick of drugs and equipment—

This was a trap.

And a chance to practice medicine again. A chance to read the medical files of an Arkhamer archive ship.

She had thirteen hours to find a better offer, by the letter of the law. Then it was the Big Nothing, the breathsucker, and her eyes freezing in their tears. And there wasn't a better offer, or she wouldn't have been here in the first place.

"I'll come."

Wandrei gave her another of his beatific smiles. He slid a tablet across the rented desk. Cynthia pressed her thumb against it. A prick and a buzz, and her blood and print sealed the contract. "Get your things. You can meet us at Dock Six in thirty minutes."

"I'll come now," she said.

"Oh," he said. "One more thing—"

That creak as he stood was the spring of the trap's jaw slamming shut. Cynthia had heard the like before. She sat and waited, prim and stiff.

"The *Charles Dexter Ward*?"

She nodded.

"It was a liveship." He might have interpreted her silence as misunderstanding. "A boojum, I mean."

"An ambulance ship and a liveship? We're all going to die," Cynthia said.

Wandrei smiled, standing, light on his feet in the partial gravity. "Everybody dies," he said. "Better to die in knowledge than in ignorance."

§

The sleek, busy tug *Veronica Lodge* hauled the cumbersome, centuries-accreted monstrosity that was the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* out of Saturn's gravity well. Cynthia stood at one of the Arkhamer ship's tiny fish-eye observation ports watching the vast misty curve of the pink-gray world beneath, hazy and serene, turning in the shadows of her moons and rings. Another steelship was putting off from Faraday Station simultaneously. She was much smaller and newer and cleaner than the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*, which in turn was dwarfed by the boojums who flashed bioluminescent messages at each other around Saturn's moons. The steelship looked like it was headed in-system, and for a moment, Cynthia wished she were on board, even knowing what would be waiting for her. The *Richard Trevithick* had not been her first disaster.

She could not say, though, that she had been lured on board the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* under false pretenses. The ship's crew of scholars and their families badly needed a doctor. Uncharitably, Cynthia suspected that they needed specifically a non-Arkhamer doctor, who would keep her mind on her patients.

The lost doctor—Martha Patterson Snead had been her name, for she had come to the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* from the *Snead Mathematica*—might have been a genius, but as the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* said goodbye to the *Veronica Lodge* and started on her stately way toward the *Charles Dexter Ward*, Cynthia found herself treating a great number of chronic vitamin deficiencies and other things that a non-genius but conscientious doctor should have been able to keep on top of.

Cynthia's patients were very polite and very grateful, but she couldn't help being aware that they would have preferred a genius who let them die of scurvy.

Other than nutritional deficiencies, the various cancers of space, and prenatal care, the most common reason for Cynthia to see patients were the minor emergencies and industrial accidents inevitably suffered in lives spent aboard a geriatric steelship requiring constant maintenance and repair. She treated smashed fingers, sprained wrists, and quite a few minor decompression injuries. She was splinting the ankle of a steamfitter's apprentice and undergraduate gas-giant meteorologist—many Arkhamers seemed to have two roles, one relating to ship's maintenance and one relating to academic research—when the young man frowned at her and said, "You aren't what I expected."

She'd forgotten his name. She glanced at the chart; he was Jaime MacReady Burlingame, traded from the *Burlingame Astrophysica Terce*. He had about twenty Terran years and a shock of orange hair that would not lie down, nor observe anything resembling a part. "Because I'm not an Arkhamer?" she asked, probing the wrist joint to be sure it really was a sprain and not a cracked bone.

"Everybody knows you're not one of us." He twitched slightly.

She held him steady, and noted the place. But when she glanced at his face, she realized his distress was over having said something more revealing than he intended. She said, "Some people aren't pleased about it?"

He looked away. She reached for the inflatable splint, hands gentle, and did not push. People told doctors things, if the doctors had the sense to keep quiet.

His pale, spotted fingers curled and uncurled. Finally, he answered, "Wandrei got in some trouble with the Faculty Senate, I hear. My advisor says Wandrei was high-handed, and he's lucky he has tenure."

Cynthia kept her head down, eyes on her work. Jaime sighed as she fitted the splint and its numbing, cooling agents began to take effect. "That should help bring the inflammation down," she told him. But as Jaime thanked her and left, she wondered if she ought to

be grateful to Wandrei, or if she ought to consider him her patron.

But she wasn't grateful—he had taken advantage of her desperation, which was not a matter for gratitude even if it had saved her life. And the Arkhamers didn't seem to think in terms of patronage and clients. They talked about apprentices and advisors, and nobody expected Cynthia to be Wandrei's apprentice.

She also noticed, as the days drew out into weeks, that nobody was approaching her about taking an apprentice of her own. She was just as glad, for she had no illusions about her own abilities as a teacher, and no idea how one person could go about imparting a medical school education from the ground up, but it made her feel acutely isolated—on a ship that was home to several hundred people—and she lay in her hammock during her sleep shift and worried about what would happen to the shy, solemn Arkhamer children when she was no longer on board. At other times, she reminded herself that the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* was part of a network of Arkhamer ships, and—as Wandrei had said—they would acquire another doctor. They were probably in the middle of negotiating the swap or the lease or the marriage or whatever it was they did. But when she was supposed to be asleep, she worried.

§

They knew they were nearing the *Charles Dexter Ward* for days before he showed up on even the longest of the long-range scanners. The first sign was the cheshires, the tentacled creatures—so common on Arkhamer vessels—which patrolled the steelship's cabins and corridors, hunting toves and similar trans-dimensional nuisances that might slip through the interstices in reality and cause a potentially deadly infestation. One reason Arkhamer ships were tolerated at stations like Faraday was because the cheshires would hunt station vermin just as heartily. Boojums took care of their own pest control.

Normally, the cheshires—dozens or hundreds of them, Cynthia never did get a good count—slept and hunted seemingly at random. One might spend hours crouched before the angle of two

intersecting bulkheads, tendrils all focused intently on one seemingly random point, its soft body slowly cycling through an array of colors that could mean anything or nothing at all… only to get up and slink away after a half-day of stalking as if nothing had happened. Cynthia often had to shoo two or three out of her hammock at bunk time, and like station cats they often returned to steal body heat once she was asleep. But as the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* began encountering the spacetime distortions that inevitably accompanied the violent death of a boojum, the ship's cheshires became correspondingly agitated. They traveled in groups, and any time Cynthia encountered two sleeping, there was also one keeping watch… if a creature with sixteen eyes and no eyelids could be said to sleep. Cynthia tried not to speculate about their dreams.

The second sign was the knocking. Random, frantic banging, as if something outside the ship wanted to come in. It came at unpredictable intervals, and would sometimes be one jarring boom and sometimes go on for five minutes. It upset the cheshires even more; they couldn't hear the headache-inducing noise, being deaf, but they could feel the vibrations. Every time Cynthia was woken in her sleep shift by that terrible knocking, she'd find at least one and usually more like three cheshires under her blankets with her, trying to hide their wedge-shaped heads between her arms and her body. She'd learned from her child patients, who lost their shy formality in talking about their playmates, how to pet the cheshires, how to use her voice in ways they could feel, and she would lie there in the dim green glow of the one working safety light and pet the trembling cheshires until she fell asleep again.

The knocking was followed by what the Arkhamers called pseudoghosts—one of them explained the phenomenon in excruciating detail while Cynthia cleaned and stitched a six-inch long gash on her forearm: not the spirits of the dead, but microbursts of previous and future time. "Or, rather, future probabilities, since the future has yet to be determined."

"Of course," Cynthia said. The girl's name was Hester Ayabo Jarmulowicz; she was tall and skinny and iron-black, and she had laid her arm open trying to repair the damage done to an interior

bulkhead by the percussive force of the knocking. "So the woman I almost ran into this morning before she vanished in a burst of static—was that Martha Patterson?"

"Probably," Hester said. "Not very tall, wiry, freckled skin?"

"Yes. Keep your arm still, please."

"That was Doctor Patterson. Before Doctor Patterson, we had Doctor Belafonte, so you may see him as well."

"And your future doctors, whoever they may be?"

"Very likely," Hester said.

Cynthia saw Dr. Patterson several times, and once an old man who had to be Dr. Belafonte, but the only future ghost she saw was herself—her hair longer, grayer, her clothes shabbier—standing beside the exam table with a scowl on her face that could have been used for spot-welding.

What frightened Cynthia most—aside from the nauseating, almost electric shock of walking into the medical bay and seeing herself—was the way that scowl had looked, as if it had been carved into her face.

It made no sense. Why would she still be on the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*? She didn't want to stay, and the Arkhamers clearly didn't want to keep her. *But then*, she thought, in the middle of autoclaving her instruments, *Wandrei trapped me once.*

That was not a nice thought, and it brought others in its wake, about pitcher plants and the way they started digesting their prey before the unfortunate insects were dead, about the way her future self's face had looked as if it were eroding around that scowl.

She scolded herself for being morbid and tried to focus on her patients and on her reading in the ship's archives (Wandrei had at least kept his word about that), but she was very grateful, as well as surprised, when, a few days after their conversation about pseudoghosts, Hester Ayabo marched into the medical bay and announced, "Isolation is bad for human beings. I am going to eat lunch with you."

Cynthia toggled off the display on the patient file she had been updating. "You are? I mean, thank you, but—"

"You can tell me about your studies," Hester said, midway

between an invitation and a command. She gave Cynthia a bright, uncertain, sidelong look—like a falcon, Cynthia thought, trying to make friends with a plow horse—and Cynthia laughed and got up and said, "Or you can tell me about yours."

Which Hester was glad to do, volubly and at length. She was an astrobiologist—the same specialty as Wandrei, and Wandrei was in fact a member of her committee, which seemed to be a little like being a parent and a little like being a boss. Hester studied creatures like boojums and cheshires and the dreadful bandersnatches, creatures that had evolved in the cold and airless dark between the stars—or the cold and airless interstices of space-time. She was very excited by the chance to study the *Charles Dexter Ward*, and on their third lunch, Cynthia found the nerve to ask her, "Do you know how the C*harles Dexter Ward* died?"

Hester stopped in the middle of bringing a slice of hydroponically cultivated tomato to her mouth. "It is something of a mystery. But I can tell you what we *do* know."

It was more than Wandrei had offered; Cynthia listened avidly.

As Wandrei had told her, the *Charles Dexter Ward* had been an ambulance ship—or, more accurately, a mobile hospital. He had been in service for more than ten solar, well-known throughout the farther and darker reaches of the system. His captain was equally well-known for disregarding evidence of pirate status when taking patients on board; though there was no formal recognition of neutrality once you got past the sovereignty of Mars, the *Charles Dexter Ward* was one boojum that no pirate would attack. "Even the Mi-Go," Hester said, "although no one knows why."

Cynthia tried to hide the reflexive curl of her fingers, even though there had been no hint of special meaning in Hester's tone. "What became of his crew?"

"Probably still aboard," Hester said. "Possibly some are even alive. Although you can't eat boojum. It's not what we'd consider meat."

"How did the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* find out about him?"

"Another Arkhamer ship picked up a distress buoy. They couldn't stop for him"—and Hester's sly look told Cynthia that,

friends or not (were they friends?) Hester would never tell an outsider why—"but they sent us a coded burst as closest relative. We may not beat other salvage attempts, even so. The beacon just said that the ship was moribund—no reason given. Possibly, the captain didn't know, or if something happened to him, it might have been junior crew who sent the probe. And nobody tells us students much anyway."

Cynthia nodded. She put her hand on her desk, about to lever herself to her feet, as Hester sucked down a length of tofu. "Huh," Cynthia said. "Do boojums die of natural causes?"

Lips shining with broth, Hester cocked her head at her. "They have to die of something, I suppose. But our records don't mention any that have."

§

By the time they were within a hundred kilometers of the dead boojum, the banging and the manifestations were close to constant. Cynthia dodged her own shadow in the medical bay almost reflexively, as she might a surgical nurse with whom she had established a practiced partnership. It was a waste of mental and physical energy—*I could just walk through myself*—but she couldn't bring herself to stop.

Hester brought her cookies, dropping the plate between Cynthia and the work screen on which she was studying what schematics she could find of the *Charles Dexter Ward*—spotty—and his sister ships—wildly varying in architecture. Or growth patterns. Or whatever you called a boojum's internal design.

"We'll be there next watch," Hester said. "You ought to rest."

"It's my work watch," Cynthia said. The cookies were pale, crisp-soft, and fragrant with lemons and lavender. It was everything she could do to nibble one delicately, with evident pleasure, and save the others for later. Hester did not take one, though Cynthia offered.

She said, "I've another dozen in my locker. I like to bake on my rec watch. And you should rest: the President and the Faculty Senate

have sent around a memo saying that everybody who is not on watch should be getting as much sleep as possible."

Cynthia glanced guiltily at her wristpiece. She had a bad habit of forgetting she'd turned notifications off. Something like a giant's fist thumped against the hull; she barely noticed. "I should be cramming boojum anatomy, is what I should be doing."

Hester smiled at her, but did not laugh. "You've been studying it since we left Faraday. You have something to prove?"

"You know what I have to prove." But she took a second cookie anyway, stared at it, and said, "Hester. If you only see one ghost… does that mean that there's only one future?"

"An interesting question," Hester said. "Temporal metadynamics aren't really my field. It may mean there are futures in which there are no people in that place. It may mean that that one particular future is locked in, I guess."

"Unavoidable?"

"Inescapable!" She grinned, plush lips a contrast to the wiry narrowness of her face and body. "I'm going to go take my mandated nap. If you have any sense you will too. You're on the away team, you know."

Cynthia's startle broke the cookie in half. "Read the memo," Hester advised, not unkindly. "And get some sleep while you can. There's unlikely to be much time to rest once we reach the *Charles Dexter Ward*."

Part Two

The corpse of the *Charles Dexter Ward* hung ten degrees off the plane of the ecliptic, in a crevice of spacetime where it was very unlikely that anyone would just stumble across it. Cynthia had been called to the bridge for the first time in her tenure as ship's surgeon aboard the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*. She stood behind the President's chair, wishing Professor Wandrei were somewhere in sight. She'd been too nervous to ask after his current whereabouts, but an overheard comment suggested he was at his instruments below. She, on the other hand, was watching the approach to the ruined liveship with

her own eyes, on screens and through the biggest expanse of transparent crystal anywhere on the ship.

She rather wished she wasn't.

The boojum was a streamlined shape tumbling gently in the midst of its own web of tentacles. Inertia twisted them in corkscrews as the boojum rotated grandly around its center of mass, drifting further and further from the solar system's common plane. It was dark, no bioluminescence revealing the details of its lines. Only the sun's rays gently cupping the curve of the hull gave it form and mass.

Around it, where Cynthia would expect to see the familiar patterns of stars burning in the icy void of the up-and-out, the Big Empty, the sky was shattered. A great mirrored lens, wrenched loose and broken into a thousand glittering shards, cast back crazy reflections of the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*, the *Charles Dexter Ward*, and the steelship already moored to the dead boojum, a ship so scarred and dented that all that could be deciphered of its hull markings was the word *CALICO*. It was a small ship—it couldn't boast more than a two- or three-man crew—and didn't worry Cynthia. What did worry her were all those jagged bits of mirror, all those uncalculated angles of reflection. The very things a mirror like that was meant to blind would be drawn to this jostling chaos, and with the boojum dead, neither the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* nor her competition had much in the way of defense—unless the stupid stories Cynthia had been hearing all her life were true and the Arkhamers had some sort of occult weaponry that nobody else knew about.

Unfortunately, she was pretty sure they didn't.

"All right," said the President, loudly enough to cut through the two or three muttered discussions taking place at various points on the bridge. "We have three immediate objectives. One, obviously, is the reason we're here"—and she nodded at the derelict before them—"the second is salvaging and neutralizing that reflecting lens, and the third is making contact with the *Calico* over there. We need to see if we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement. Please talk to your departments. By no later than the top of the next shift, I want a

roster of volunteers for EVA. I know some departments badly need the practice." She glanced at an elderly Arkhamer Cynthia did not know; there was clearly a story there by the way the man blushed and stammered, but Cynthia doubted she'd ever hear it.

"What about the *Calico*?" a voice said from the doorway. It was Wandrei, and if he was in disgrace, he didn't seem to mind.

"Professor Wandrei," the President said coolly. "Are you volunteering?"

"Of course," Wandrei said, smiling at her affably. "And since I imagine they've docked at the most useful point of—ah—ingress, may I suggest that you send the planned away team with me?"

There was a fraught silence. Cynthia stared fixedly at the nearest of the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s blank, glazed eyes and cursed herself for thirty-nine kinds of fool. Finally, the President said, "Thomas, you're plotting something."

"I pursue knowledge, Madam President," said Wandrei, "as we all do. Or have you forgotten that I sat on your tenure committee?"

One of the junior scholars gasped. Cynthia did not look away from the boojum's dead eye, but she could hear the smile in the President's voice when she said, "Very well. Take Meredith and Hester and Dr. Feuerwerker, and go find out what the *Calico* is doing. And remember to report back!"

§

The *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* possessed two landing craft, a lumbering scow called the *T.H. White* and an incongruously sporty little skimmer called the *Caitlín R. Kiernan*. The skimmer seated four, if nobody was too fussy about his or her personal space, and Hester knew how to fly it—which meant, Wandrei said, herding his team toward the *Caitlín R. Kiernan*, that they didn't need to wait for one of the two people on board who could fly the *T.H. White*.

The President was right, Cynthia thought, as she strapped herself in next to Meredith. Wandrei was plotting something. He was almost bouncing with eagerness, and there was a gleam in his eye that she did not like. But she couldn't think of anything she could do

about it from here.

Hester ran through her pre-flight checks without letting Wandrei hurry her. Meredith—a big blonde Valkyrie whose specialty was what she called boojum mathematics—apologized for crowding Cynthia with her shoulders and said, "Could you see a cause of death, Dr. Feuerwerker?"

"No," Cynthia said. "He just looked dead to me. But I don't know if I'd recognize a fatal wound on a boojum if I saw one."

"It probably didn't leave a visible mark," Wandrei said from where he was riding shotgun. "So far as our research has discovered, there are only two ways to kill a boojum. One is to cut it literally to pieces—a tactic which backfires disastrously far more often than it succeeds—the other, to deliver a systemic shock powerful enough to disrupt all of the creature's cardio and/or synaptic nodes at once."

"That's one mother of a shock," Cynthia said, feeling unease claw its way a little deeper beneath her skin.

"Yes," said Wandrei and did not elaborate.

Hester piloted the *Caitlín R. Kiernan* with more verve than Cynthia's stomach found comfortable; she gripped her safety harness and swallowed hard, and Meredith said kindly, "Hester is one of the best young pilots we have."

"When I was a child, I wanted to jump ship on Leng Station and become a mechanic," Hester said cheerfully. "I tried a couple of times, but they always brought me back." She piloted the *Caitlín R. Kiernan* in a low swooping arc across the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s forward tentacles, and they could see that Wandrei's guess had been correct; the *Calico* had succeeded in prying open one of the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s airlocks, and the ship was moored partly within the boojum.

Cynthia hoped the Arkhamers had a better way in than that.

§

As it turned out, they didn't. And Cynthia was unsettled to watch Meredith and Hester strap sidearms on over their pressure suits. Were they really expecting that much trouble from the crew of the

Calico? And didn't salvage law give her first picking? Or would the Arkhamers' earlier intercept and beacon trump that?

Cynthia had never encountered a dead boojum before, and she had braced herself with the knowledge that there would be any number of things she wasn't expecting. But no amount of bracing or foreknowledge could ever have been sufficient for the stench of the *Charles Dexter Ward*—a fetor so intense Cynthia would have sworn she could pick up the scent through her helmet, and before the airlock cycled. What that said about the spaceworthiness of the *Caitlín R. Kiernan*, Cynthia did not care to consider.

What the cycling outer airlock door revealed was more of a shock than it might have been if she hadn't already been dragging her tongue across her teeth in a futile effort to scrape the stench of death away. The membranes between the struts were not glossy with health, appearing dull and tacky instead, but the amazing stink that left her lightheaded and pained even within the oxygenated confines of her helmet had led her to expect—well, what course did decay take, on a boojum? Writhing infestations? Deliquescence? Suppurating lesions?

There was none of that.

Just the ridged stretch of intact-seeming corridor disappearing into the curvature of the dead ship, and the reek of putrescence. *Don't throw up in your helmet*, Cynthia told herself. That would be one sure way of making things even less pleasant.

The *Charles Dexter Ward* retained good atmospheric pressure—though Cynthia couldn't have attested to the air quality—and she didn't need to tongue on her suit intercom for Wandrei and the others to hear her when she said, "Isn't anything we salvage from this mess going to be unusable due to contamination?"

Meredith said, "Anything sealed should be fine. And we wouldn't want unsealed medical supplies anyway."

"I can smell it through my suit."

Wandrei looked at her with curious intensity. "Really?" he said, brow wrinkling behind his faceplate. "I don't smell anything."

"Maybe your suit has a bad filter," Meredith said. "We do our best to check them, but, well." She shrugged—a clumsy gesture, but

Cynthia understood. When everything the Arkhamers owned, from their clothes to their ship, was second-hand, salvaged, scavenged, there was only so much they could do.

"That's probably it," she said, although she wasn't sure—and from the look he gave her before he turned away, Wandrei wasn't sure, either.

"Let's see if we can't find the crew of the *Calico*," he said.

I am walking in a dead body, Cynthia said periodically to herself, but aside from the eye-blurring stench that no one else could smell, the only sign of death was the darkness. Every boojum Cynthia had ever traveled on had used its bioluminescence to illuminate any space its human crew and passengers were using. But the *Charles Dexter Ward* stayed dark.

They proceeded cautiously. Cynthia remembered Hester saying the crew of the *Charles Dexter Ward* might still be alive somewhere in their dead ship, and there was the nagging question of the *Calico*'s crew—a question that got naggier and naggier the farther they went without finding a single trace of them.

"We know they weren't on their ship," Hester muttered. "Corinne hailed them until she was hoarse."

"And they haven't been salvaging," Meredith said. "None of the doors since the airlock has been forced open."

"My question," Cynthia said, "is how long they've been here. And if they aren't salvaging, what are they doing?"

That was two questions, and actually she had a third: what did Wandrei know that she and Hester and Meredith didn't? He didn't seem worried, and she had noticed after a while that, although he wasn't in a hurry, he did seem to know where he was going. She didn't want to be the one to mention it, though. Not a good idea for the politely tolerated outsider.

"What else can you do on a dead boojum?" Hester demanded.

"Maybe," Cynthia said after a moment. "Maybe they weren't here for salvage in the first place. Maybe they needed a hospital. Not all doctors are as laissez-faire as Captain Diemschuller."

"The *Calico*'s too small for piracy," Meredith said, "but I agree with your general principle. If they aren't here for salvage—how do

we find the operating theaters?"

Her question went unanswered as they came to a corridor junction and caught sight of another human being.

He was in shirtsleeves rather than a pressure suit, wearing the uniform of the Interplanetary Ambulance Corps, dark blue with red piping and *CDW* embroidered on his sleeve. Across his chest were blazoned a row of symbols including a caduceus, a red crescent, and the Chinese ideogram for "heart." Despite being distracted by the medical symbols, Cynthia knew there was something wrong with him several seconds before she was able to identify why she thought so. And the man—youngish and tall, his skin fishbelly pale in their floodlights—stood and stared at them, his face so perfectly blank that Cynthia finally realized that was the problem. No relief, no anger, no fear—not even curiosity.

"Hello!" she said, starting forward and forcing brightness into her voice as if she could compensate for his nullity. "I'm Dr. Feuerwerker with the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*. Is your captain—" And then she was close enough to see him clearly, close enough to see that the shadow at his midsection was not a shadow but a hole, jagged-edged and gaping, where his stomach used to be, close enough to see the greenish tinge to his pale skin.

Her voice was thin and screechy in her own ears when she said, "He's dead."

"What?" said Hester

"He's dead. He's been dead for weeks."

"But he's standing up. A dead body couldn't…" Hester's voice dried up with a faint click as the dead man turned, giving them a good view of his disemboweled torso, and started walking down the hall away from them. His locomotion wasn't perfect, but it was damn good for someone who'd probably been dead for three months.

Hester started to blaspheme, and Meredith urgently hushed her. This was not the place to be attracting that kind of attention.

"It might be a parasite," Cynthia said, having run frantically through her knowledge of what could animate a corpse. "Something that got through a gap in spacetime when the *Charles Dexter Ward*

died. We have to tell the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*"—surprised, Cynthia realized her concern was not for herself, stuck here in the belly of a dead boojum, but for Jaime and the shy children and the cheshires Cynthia couldn't count—"can we call them from here? How far back—"

"Calm yourself, Dr. Feuerwerker," said Wandrei. "What you see is not the work of a parasite. It is the pursuit of knowledge."

That brought her up short. She looked at him, calm and sweating behind the faceplate of his pressure suit, and swallowed against a curl of bright nausea. "You knew about this?"

The twitch at the corner of his lips was more disturbing than the dead man striding away from them. Hastily, Cynthia turned her attention forward again. There were medical-school stories of the horrors Arkhamer doctors got up to. Cynthia had never credited them, considering them part of the general anti-Arkhamer bigotry that permeated so many institutions of higher learning—and so many spacedock taverns.

Now she wondered if she had been too willing, in her conscientious open-mindedness, to assume there was no truth behind the slander. *Ooh, ethics now, Dr. Feuerwerker? That's a new look on you.*

She stepped forward, following the dead man. Wandrei and the other women jogged to catch up, their pressure suits rustling with the sudden movement. As Wandrei fell back into stride beside Cynthia, she said, "So when did the *Charles Dexter Ward* sign on an Arkhamer doctor?" Wandrei remained silent, though she waited after each sentence before adding the next. "That's what got the ship killed, isn't it? That's the real motive behind coming here."

"Reanimation isn't a topic we commonly pursue," Wandrei said. "But if… if someone has made it work—think of the advance to human understanding. To medicine."

"To shipping," Meredith said.

"There are a number of applications," Hester was beginning, when Cynthia almost-shouted, "Are you fucking nuts? Every scare story I've ever heard about raising the dead says that either dying or coming back drives people mad. Are you really suggesting —"

"Are you a scientist, Dr. Feuerwerker?" Wandrei asked. "Then I suggest you wait for the data."

The walking cadaver did not move particularly fast. When she caught up to him, he turned to her, jaw moving. If he was trying to say something, the lack of lungs and diaphragm impeded the process. Upon closer inspection, he was a Major and a registered nurse. The name on his shirt pocket read *Ngao*. His eyes, dull and concave where the ship's environment had begun dehydrating them, fastened on Cynthia's face through the helmet.

His jaw worked again.

Was he conscious? she wondered, the chill running up her back so real that her head wrenched to one side. *Did he know he was dead? Eviscerated? Did he ever try to touch his stomach and have his fingers brush his spine?* She wanted to apologize, even though Major Ngao's fate was none of her doing. But she, too, had sought after forbidden knowledge—not reanimation, at least the irony wasn't that cruel. She'd muttered those same words about science and the pursuit of knowledge and told herself that Chen and Derleth would be pleased. That Galileo would be pleased.

Had it been a lie? She didn't know. Chen and Derleth and Galileo had been dead for centuries. She couldn't ask them—and even this lunatic on the *Charles Dexter Ward* couldn't bring them back. She remembered her burning certainty that the truth was there, attainable and valuable beyond any price—and she remembered Captain Nwapa's expression, too, that one flicker of horror before the captain got her game-face back. It took a lot to rattle a boojum captain, and Cynthia was not proud of the achievement.

Wandrei said crisply, "Take us to Dr. Fiorenzo," before Cynthia could find any words that weren't trite and false—*and probably pointless, really, Dr. Feuerwerker, the man's missing nine-tenths of his vital organs, do you think he has any attention to spare for you? And if nothing else*, Cynthia thought grimly, *now at least she had a name to hang the nightmare on.*

§

The corridors of the *Charles Dexter Ward* were dark and silent as Cynthia followed the Arkhamers following the dead man. From time spent on the *Richard Trevithick* and other boojums, she knew a little about their internal architecture, and she'd done her best to stay oriented, so she was fairly sure that they were heading away from the rending plates and tearing diamond teeth of the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s mouth (and she couldn't help wondering if his crew had called him Charlie, the same way the *Richard Trevithick*'s crew always referred to their boojum as Ricky—it was a stupid thought and wouldn't be banished). The anatomy of boojums adhered to no principle that Terran mammals abided by, including bilateral symmetry, but if you were headed away from the mouth, you were probably headed toward the cloaca. And most ships' systems were stuck as deep in the bulk of the boojum as the bioengineers could get them.

The *Charles Dexter Ward* being a hospital ship, there was not one specific area that Cynthia would have identified as the sickbay. Rather she and the others had passed corridor after corridor of clinical chambers and wards, rooms that Cynthia was sure would have reeked of disinfectant and that eternal powdery medicinal smell were it not for the eye-watering putrescence overwhelming everything. They found the operating theaters, which looked as if they'd been the scenes of intense guerrilla fighting, and Cynthia's pace slowed automatically, trying to reconstruct what had happened, where the defenders had been, how the line of attack had run, whether that was all human blood in horrible sticky pools, or if some of it was other colors.

"Dr. Feuerwerker," Meredith said, pointing, and she saw that farther down the corridor, in the direction that Major Ngao was plodding, uninterested in what might have been the site of his own death, there was, for the first time in hours, a gleam of light that they hadn't brought with them from the *Caitlín R. Kiernan*.

And as they followed the dead man—he dripped, occasionally, an irregular trail of brownish fluid on the floor—around the bend in the dead boojum's corridor, Cynthia saw an open pressure hatch, a

slice of light spilled across the floor, and a glimpse of one of the medical labs.

Within it, she could just make out some white-coated movement.

She followed Wandrei, she thought, because she had so little idea what else to do. *This is how war crimes happen. People get overwhelmed and follow orders. If you were as brilliant as one of these Arkhamer doctors, you'd know what to do besides whatever Wandrei tells you.*

And then she bit her lip inside the helmet and thought, *If I were as brilliant as one of these Arkhamer doctors, the* Richard Trevithick *might be as dead as Charlie here.*

That thought chilled whatever part of her the quietly guiding dead man had missed.

Something brushed Cynthia's right glove, then grabbed it. Her throat closed with fright, and she turned as she tried to pull away, looking down to see what horrible thing had caught her. But it was a suit gauntlet, tight against her own, and when she looked up again, she met Hester's gaze dimly, through two helmet bubbles glazed with the reflected light of the lab up ahead. She'd stopped, lost in thought. The idea of being left out here in the dark with the stars knew what made her heart jump like a ship's rat in the claws of a cheshire.

She squeezed back and caught a flash of Hester's teeth, bright against the darkness of her face. They moved forward together, though any comfort from the other woman's presence was abrogated by a series of scraping sounds that Cynthia's medical ear easily identified as metal on bone.

Five more steps brought them into the lab. Cynthia found herself fascinated by the way the light—clip-on work lighting trailing to batteries, and not biolume—caught on the scratches on Meredith's and Wandrei's pressure suits as they stepped out of the shadows of the corridor. She was avoiding looking past them, at whatever the lab contained, and their broad shoulders mercifully blocked most of the view.

Then Wandrei stepped to one side, to make room for her and

Hester, and raised both hands to open the catches on his helmet. As he lifted it off, Cynthia had to fight the urge to reach out and slam it back into place—as if a standard, somewhat worn pressure suit was any protection in a situation like this.

Cynthia stayed on suit air anyway. It made her feel a little better, and she noticed Meredith and Hester were in no hurry to uncouple their helmets either.

"Dr. Fiorenzo," Wandrei said pleasantly. "Allow me to introduce my colleagues. I take it you've had some success?"

"Limited," Fiorenzo answered in a light contralto, turning from a dissection table upon which the twitching remains of something that couldn't possibly still be alive were pinned. She did not seem at all surprised to see them—and Wandrei apparently did not need to introduce himself. "I'm pleased you're here. After the accident… Charlie dead and all the crew…"

Her face revealed grief, tension, relief. What would it be like, trapped alone parsecs off any shipping lane, inside an enormous dead creature slowly rotting around you?

The introductions were a scene of almost surreal cordiality. Fiorenzo was a narrow-shouldered, olive-skinned woman. Her face was smooth everywhere but at the corners of her eyes as she smiled, and she wasn't old enough to be going salt-and-pepper yet, though what few strands of grey there were stood out like silver embroidery on black velvet against the darkness of her hair. She wore it in a pixyish crop, like a lot of practical-minded spacers.

I thought you'd be older, Cynthia didn't say, in the hellish mundanity of pleasantries carried out while the relic of Major Ngao stood against the far bulkhead, arms folded across his chest, watching cloudy-eyed but seemingly intent, as if he were following the conversation. She was spared from having to shake hands because Fiorenzo was gloved, and she was spared from having to come up with something else to say when Fiorenzo paused at her name, frowned, and said, "Feuerwerker. They threw you off the *Richard Trevithick* just before— Damned shame. That was good research. It's about time somebody found out what's in one of those biosuspension canisters!"

Cynthia managed not to step back, rocked by a peculiar combination of the warmth of a fellow scientist's regard and the horror of who, exactly, was praising her. Her jaw was still working on an answer when Fiorenzo continued, "Well, you're welcome here now. We'll find some things out, you and I! Maybe even a thing or two about the Mi-Go!"

"Thank you," Cynthia said weakly. She let Fiorenzo, Meredith, and Wandrei step away. Hester crowded close and leaned their helmets together in order to whisper: "What did you do?"

"I thought everybody knew already."

"Tell me anyway."

Cynthia couldn't quite figure out where to start. She was still fumbling when Hester broke and asked outright, "You were trying to reverse-engineer a Mi-Go canister?"

"A vacant one," Cynthia said in weak protest. "Not one with somebody inside."

"Sweet breathsucker," Hester said. "Haven't you heard about what happened to the *Lavinia Whateley*?"

A boojum privateer. Vanished without a trace after pirating a cargo of the Mi-Go's canisters of disembodied brains. Rumor was that all hands and even the ship herself had wound up disassembled and carted off to the outer reaches of the solar system, living brains forever locked in metal tins, going immortally mad.

Cynthia nodded tersely, lips thin. "I didn't say it was a good idea."

Hester looked like she wanted to say something else, but Wandrei called her over. Cynthia stayed where she was, not wanting to intrude on an Arkhamer conversation.

Although… *was* Fiorenzo an Arkhamer? Cynthia'd learned enough to recognize the names of the Arkhamer ships—all of them named for one of the nine that had originally set out from Earth—and Fiorenzo wasn't one of them. But Wandrei called her Doctor Fiorenzo, and she'd introduced herself the same way—Julia Filomela Fiorenzo. No "Jarmulowicz" or "Burlingame" or "Dubois." So either she wasn't a Arkhamer—whom the Arkhamers treated like an Arkhamer, and Cynthia wasn't buying that for a second—or she was

an Arkhamer and her ship had disowned her.

Well, gosh, Dr. Feuerwerker. I wonder why.

Her ship had disowned her, but Wandrei hadn't—and Cynthia remembered the comments about Wandrei getting in trouble, remembered the President's suspicions, and knew that, yes, Wandrei had brought them out here, not on a mission of mercy, but to check in on Fiorenzo's experiments. Experiments that the rest of the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* did not know about, or at least did not know were still ongoing.

Sweet merciful Buddha of the Breathsucker, Cynthia thought and looked down to discover that she'd wandered over much closer than she'd meant to get to the dissection table where Fiorenzo had been working when they came in.

The creature on it had once been human. It should not still be alive.

Or possibly it wasn't. She twisted her head, forcing her gaze away from the wet holes where the thing's face had been, and found Major Ngao watching her. Watching? Staring at? Staring through? She had to squeeze her eyes shut and bite down hard on her lip to keep the bubble of hysteria from escaping, and when she opened her eyes again, she was staring down at the dead, twitching creature's chest.

Where, under the blood, the words '*Free Ship Calico Jack*' were still, just barely, legible on the scraps of its uniform.

Cynthia stepped back, a big over-dramatic step that caught everyone's attention, Fiorenzo's voice dying in the middle of a sentence: "the bodies just aren't fresh enough. I need—"

"Dr. Feuerwerker?" Wandrei said, with that nasty snide tone that every teacher in the universe used when they'd caught you not paying attention in class.

Cynthia opened her mouth, without the least idea what was going to come out—and more than half convinced it was going to be, *There's nothing to ensure freshness like harvesting them yourself, is there, Dr. Fiorenzo?* But some remnant of self-preservation interfered, and what she said was:

"How did the *Charles Dexter Ward* die?"

"What?" Fiorenzo said; Wandrei was frowning. Cynthia repeated the question.

"Oh. There was… the mirror broke," Fiorenzo said with a vague gesture. "And the doppelkinder came. They killed the crew and the ship."

"How did you escape?" Meredith asked, wide-eyed

"Luck, I think," Fiorenzo said with a shrug that almost looked like a spasm, and a bitter laugh. "I was the pathologist, and I was in the morgue when it happened. I think they just couldn't smell me. And you know they don't last very long."

Yes, like homicidal mayflies. They rarely lasted more than a few hours after they'd killed their primary host. Cynthia nodded and did not—*did not*—look at the dissection table. "And you've been here ever since?"

Fiorenzo offered a sad, slanted little smile. "There's been nowhere I can go."

§

Fiorenzo wanted, she said, to transfer her most promising experiments to the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*. As she and Wandrei and Meredith started a discussion of how that might be accomplished, Hester caught Cynthia by the arm and dragged her grimly out into the hallway, still within the light of Fiorenzo's rigged operating theater, but well out of earshot.

There Hester stopped and leaned into Cynthia's helmet again. "She's lying."

"About what?" Cynthia said, her mind still stuck blankly on that poor twitching thing strapped down on Fiorenzo's operating table.

"Doppelkinder can't kill a boojum. They won't even go after one. Boojums don't recognize their own reflections."

"Wait. What?"

"Doppelkinder hunt in mirrors," Hester began with exaggerated patience.

"Not that," Cynthia said. She'd been terrified of doppelkinder since her first Civil Defense class when she was five. "Boojums don't

see themselves in mirrors?"

"Two-dimensional representations don't mean anything to them. Cheshires are the same way." Hester managed a smile, although it wasn't a very good one. "That's why there's that folk saying about how you can't fool a cheshire. The most cunning optical illusion ever created won't even make them twitch."

"And doppelkinder are dependent on optical illusions," Cynthia said, finally catching up to what Hester was trying to say.

"They don't eat people's eyes for the nutritional value."

"Right. But if the doppelkinder didn't kill the *Charles Dexter Ward*, what did?"

Hester folded her arms and gave Cynthia a flat obdurate stare. "I think she did."

"Fiorenzo?" Cynthia spluttered a little, then caught herself and regrouped. "Not that I don't believe she would do it in a heartbeat, but why? Why the boojum, I mean? And for the love of little fishy gods, how?"

Hester's gaze dropped. "You were supposed to talk me out of it. It's a crazy idea, and I know it's because I'm jealous."

"Jealous?"

"If Professor Wandrei had even once shown this kind of interest in my work…" She trailed off, her face twisting.

"I understand," Cynthia said and dared to offer Hester's shoulder a clumsy pat. "But, Hester, I don't think you're wrong. I'm pretty sure she killed the crew of that little scavenger ship." And she told Hester about the uniform.

"We have to tell Professor Wandrei," Hester said, taking a step back toward Fiorenzo's little island of lunatic light.

This time it was Cynthia who caught hold of Hester's arm. "Do you really think he doesn't know?"

She hated herself a little for the sick expression on Hester's face, the knowledge that she, Cynthia Feuerwerker, had just opened her mouth and killed something irreplaceable.

Hester said, barely whispering even though they were still helmet-to-helmet, "What should we do?"

Cynthia opened her mouth to say, *What* can *we do?* and all but

physically choked on her own words. Because that was how war crimes happened. That was how you ended up a future-ghost on an Arkhamer ship with the lines of a scowl bitten so deep in your face you never really stopped frowning.

And Hester was watching her hopefully. Hester, knowing what she'd done, was still willing to believe that Cynthia would do the right thing.

Cynthia took a deep breath. "If she killed the *Charles Dexter Ward*, how did she do it? I mean, you and Wandrei said there were only two ways, and she clearly didn't cut him to pieces, so… ?"

"She must have rigged some kind of galvanic motor," Hester said. "If she hooked it up to the UPS—and a hospital ship would have to have one, even a liveship—that would take care of the power requirements…"

Cynthia got a good look at the wideness of Hester's eyes before she realized that here in the dark corridor, even with their helmets leaned up together, she shouldn't have been able to make out the details of her friend's expression. Hester stepped back slowly, her features revealed more plainly as Cynthia's shadow no longer fell across her face. Cynthia forced her gaze to the right.

All along the passageway, bioluminescent runners were crawling with unexpected brilliance. Fiorenzo had reanimated the *Charles Dexter Ward*.

"Aw, shitballs," Hester said.

Part Three

Looking away from the light that showed the *Charles Dexter Ward* was no longer entirely dead was as hard as opening a rusted zipper. But Cynthia did it, and didn't let herself look back. She pulled Hester a little further down the corridor and said, "Now we really need to know how she killed him. And whether it'll work a second time."

"It should," Hester said. "Whatever force is animating him, a big enough shock should disrupt it. We just have to find her machine."

"I like your use of the word 'just.' Something like that—would it be portable or not?" The *Charles Dexter Ward*'s bioluminescence was

continuing to ripple and pulse in an arrhythmic not-quite-pattern that was like nothing Cynthia had ever see a boojum do before. It was already giving her the mother of all headaches, and if it was a reflection of the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s state of mind, then she couldn't believe it was a good auspice.

"One that could kill a boojum? Definitely not."

"So wherever she built it, that's where it is. But how do we find it? It's a boojum—how do we even look?"

"Um," said Hester and tugged Cynthia another few steps away from Fiorenzo's lab. "The closed stacks have a schematic. Professor Wandrei said not to share it with—"

"Outsiders," Cynthia finished wearily, and Hester ducked her head like a reproved child. And of course the Arkhamers had a second, inner archive to which Cynthia had not been given access. It was their secrets that kept them alive and independent. "It's okay. You don't have to—"

"No, at this point it's only stupid and self-destructive," Hester said. "Here."

Cynthia's heads-up was filled with a spidery green constellation: the human-scale paths through the *Charles Dexter Ward*. She had only a moment to appreciate them before her pressure suit ballooned taut and a sudden sharp pressure in her ear canals distracted her. Reflexively, she opened her mouth and closed her eyes—every spacer knew and feared that sensation—but it was just a pressure fluctuation, not a hull breach. She closed her mouth again and blew until her ears popped.

When she opened her eyes, Hester was looking at her, head swaying in relief. "Good idea, staying suited."

Cynthia took a tentative breath and gagged. The reek of putrescence that had poisoned every breath since she stepped through Charlie's airlock was thick enough to taste now, and she wasted thirty seconds re-checking her perfectly functioning suit seals. "By Dodgson's blessed camera," she swore, then belatedly realized she didn't know how Hester felt about taking sacred names in vain. "I think that took a year off my life."

"So long as it's just one," Hester said. She ran a gloved hand up

one of Charlie's dead interior bulkheads, tracing the rippling patterns of necroluminescence. Her fingers found an indentation, and Cynthia could see her face screw up with disgust through the bubble of the helmet. When she pushed in, her glove vanished to the knuckles. Charlie's flesh made a squelching sound.

Hester hooked and ripped; mucilaginous strings of meat stretched and rent. She tossed a panel to the deck; it rang like ceramic. Behind, a cavity lined with readouts and conduits lay revealed. Hester, wincing, reached for a small rack of what Cynthia recognized as wireless connectors. She tugged one loose, made a face, and—before Cynthia could decide that she really ought to stop her—slotted it into a jack on her suit.

"Hester—"

"Shush," Hester said. "I spend enough time researching the damned things. A dead one shouldn't bo— oh."

"What?"

"Run."

§

They ran. Suits rustling and rasping, booted feet thudding dully on the decking. Off to the left, something scurried. Cynthia's head snapped around, but Hester put a hand on her arm and pulled. "Tove," she said.

Normally, you would never see a tove on a boojum, but Charlie's death had strained the fabric of space-time, making inter-dimensional slippage easier, and a dead boojum could not eat its own parasites as was their usual habit. Cynthia thought about the shattered ward-mirror, intended to defend against nastier creatures than toves: doppelkinder, raths, and other predators. It worked because it reflected nothing but the Big Empty—even at dock, those warped enormous mirrors wouldn't reflect on a human scale and thus could not be exploited by doppelkinder, just as they blinded raths. Mirrors were not standard equipment on all ships, but for a hospital ship like Charlie they were an extra line of safety. Charlie broke it dying, she guessed. Fiorenzo had invented the doppelkinder

—who didn't hunt boojums and who would never have left Major Ngao's eyes intact—as an alibi.

Then she heard something else, not the scuttling of a tove, but a wetter sound, a bigger sound. She didn't have the strength of will not to glance back, and there, barely illuminated by Charlie's twitchy necroluminescence, she saw human silhouettes, a reaching arm with the remains of an Ambulance Corps uniform, the glare of an eyeball in a half-skinned face.

Hester swung through a hatchway, pulling Cynthia with her, and slammed the emergency plate located behind glass on the other side. A blast door dropped with decapitating force. If the *Charles Dexter Ward* were to be hulled, it was in the interests of crew and ship that pressure doors should guillotine any unfortunate they caught. It was a case of one life for many, and spacers learned not to stand in doorways.

"That won't keep them for long," Hester panted. "But we can stop for a second."

Cynthia tried to slow her breathing, to get more use out of her canned air. "Where in the nine names of Hell did they come from?"

"Charlie opened a door," Hester said.

Cynthia squinted, but that didn't make what Hester was saying make any more sense. "I'm missing some context—"

Hester tapped Charlie's connector, plugged into her opposite forearm jack. "I've got access to his logs, and I think… I think he didn't like Fiorenzo killing his crew, because it's pretty clear from the logs that she was. I think that's why she electrocuted him. But the reanimated crew was killing the living crew, and she doesn't seem to be able to control what she makes. So she lured them into a vacuum bay and sealed the door—"

But vacuum can't kill things that are already dead.

"Charlie let his crew out," Cynthia said.

Hester nodded, the boojum's crawling green and violet necroluminescence rippling across her corneas and the bubble of her suit. "He can open any door I override. And they're probably not very… safe. Anymore."

"No," Cynthia agreed. "Not safe." Her throat hurt. She made

herself stop swallowing and worked enough spit into her mouth to say, "We'd better keep moving. We have to find Fiorenzo's device. Before her mistakes find us."

Part Four

"She said she was in the morgue," Cynthia muttered.

"What?" Hester said, distracted by shooting the rotting hand off their lead pursuer.

"Dr. Fiorenzo. She said when it happened, she was in the morgue. And she was the pathologist. If she was going to hide something anywhere, she'd hide it there."

"I imagine you didn't get too many people dropping in for a friendly chat," Hester said. "So where's the morgue from here?"

By the time Cynthia had enough breath to reply—running in a pressure suit was no picnic, and although Fiorenzo's reanimated corpses weren't very fast, they were undistractable and relentless—Hester had found the answer herself. "One up and two over. Okay then."

Cynthia had spent time on a handful of boojums—as passenger, as crew, that last nasty week on the *Richard Trevithick* as a prisoner—and there was no standard system of orientation. Some boojums had no internal signposts at all; unless the captain gave you the schematic, you were dependent on a crew member to guide you around. The *Charles Dexter Ward* was probably the best and most thoughtfully labeled boojum Cynthia had ever seen, and even so it was essentially markers to help you plot your position on a gigantic imaginary three-dimensional graph, onto which Charlie only problematically mapped.

But it was better than nothing.

And it was better than being torn apart by these mindless, malevolent things that Fiorenzo had created out of what had once been men and women. And surely, Cynthia thought, remembering the row of symbols on Major Ngao's uniform, the men and women who deserved it least. She had been appalled by Fiorenzo and afraid of her and a little (admit it, Cynthia) envious, but now she began to

be truly angry. Not at the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, but at the wanton destructiveness.

"Up is good," Hester panted beside her. "The ladder'll take them longer."

"I just wish it would stop them," Cynthia said. "Or that anything would." Thus far, though they'd kept ahead of the reanimated, they hadn't managed to lose them—certainly not to stop them.

"Here," Hester said. The ladder was stainless steel dulled with Charlie's slow decomposition; Hester had to override the hatch at the top with Cynthia crammed against her lower legs to avoid the frustrated grabs of the reanimated beneath them.

Hester helped Cynthia through the hatch and they slammed it closed again. Then they took off running—two shambling scientists pursued by more shambling corpses than they could stop to count.

§

The morgue, when they found it, was long and low and cold—and all too obviously the right place. It crawled with the same decayed-looking light as the rest of the Charles Dexter Ward, but here, that light limned empty body bags and open lockers. Cynthia was careful to close and dog the door behind them before they proceeded down the length of the room. Her skin crawled at the idea of locking herself in here, blocking her own route of escape… but what waited outside was worse. They'd managed to leave the reanimated behind, but Cynthia had no confidence that that would last.

They came around a corner to find Doctor Fiorenzo crouched behind an autopsy table, huddling with Professor Wandrei over a gaping hole in the decking. The ragged, ichorous edges framed something that looked like an exposed boojum neural cluster. The former Major Ngao was silently handing Fiorenzo tools. Fiorenzo had a veterinary syringe in her hand, a medieval-looking device with a needle easily four inches long. It was filled with some colorless fluid. Cynthia could make out two more empties on the floor.

Meredith… Cynthia didn't have to get close to see the lines of

black stitchery holding the crushed edges of her neck together. Her head lolled to one side, tongue drooping from her slack mouth, and her eyes were half-lidded and beginning to glaze.

Cynthia wondered how Fiorenzo had arranged to have one of the pressure doors catch Meredith, and how long it would be before she got around to Wandrei. And how he could be so blind as not to see that he would be Fiorenzo's next experiment.

Hester raised and aimed her pistol. Wandrei must have glanced up just then, because he made a warning sound.

Fiorenzo rose to her feet and turned. Light shivered along the needle of the syringe as she lowered it to a non-threatening position beside her thigh.

The thing that had been Meredith took a shuffling step closer and Cynthia hid her cringe. For a moment, Cynthia waited, searching for words. Wondering why Hester hadn't pulled the trigger.

"Doctor Feuerwerker—" Wandrei began.

Somehow, Cynthia silenced him with a glance. It must have been scathing; even her eyes felt scorched by it.

Fiorenzo's eyes met Cynthia's. "You're a doctor. A researcher. You should understand!"

"I understand that you're a mass murderer, and you're putting everyone in this sector of space at risk. Your monsters—your victims—aren't far behind us. What are you going to do when Charlie lets them in here?"

"I'm getting close!"

"No, you're not." Cynthia waved a little wildly at Major Ngao. "Maybe you've made him not-dead, but you haven't made him alive. You can't. You can't make Meredith alive and you can't make that poor bastard off the *Calico* alive. You can animate the meat, but that's not the same thing and you know it. This boojum isn't alive. What it is, is wrong."

The *Charles Dexter Ward* shuddered beneath their feet, as if in agreement. Cynthia lurched into Hester, Wandrei and the two dead people went down, and even Fiorenzo had to grab at a safety-bar to keep her feet. Cynthia was reaching for Hester's arm, to lift her

sidearm back on target—

Fiorenzo slammed the syringe with which she had been about to inject the *Charles Dexter Ward* through lab coat and trousers and into her own thigh.

Cynthia stared, disbelieving. Fiorenzo straightened, smiling, and was starting to say something when she seized, crashing to the deck as stiff and solid as a bar of iron. Cynthia said over her to Wandrei, "We have to stop this."

"Science, Dr. Feuerwerker," Wandrei began, and Cynthia shouted, "Science schmience!" which startled him into shutting up.

Cynthia was a little startled herself, but she plunged on while she had the initiative, "Fiorenzo's leavings out there aren't science. They're walking nuclear waste. And what she did to Meredith is murder."

"That was an accident," Wandrei said.

Hester made a bitter noise that wasn't a laugh. "Do you really believe that?"

Wandrei didn't answer her. He said, "Dr. Fiorenzo has achieved a remarkable—" and that was when he made the mistake of letting Meredith get too close.

Cynthia and Hester had not stopped to ponder the intentions of their reanimated pursuers, not with Charlie's stuttering necroluminescence all around them and the carnage everywhere they looked. But if they had wondered, any last niggling doubt would have been unequivocally dispelled.

Meredith tore Wandrei to pieces, starting with his mandible.

Hester screamed; so did Wandrei, for a while. *By the Queen of Hearts, is that his endocardium?* Cynthia dragged Hester back, both of them sprayed with Wandrei's blood like stationer graffiti, and said, her voice low and frantic, "We have to find the machine. Now. While the door's still closed and Meredith is… distracted."

Hester's gulp might have been a sob or a hysterical laugh, but she nodded.

They looked around, trying to ignore the gory welter in the center of the room. There wasn't much there beyond dissection tables and refrigeration units. A microscope locked down on a stand,

a centrifuge…

"Why would you have so many refrigeration units when the universe's biggest refrigerator is right outside your door?" Cynthia muttered. "One, sure, for samples and emergencies, but…"

They skirted the edges of the room, both keeping an uneasy eye on their roommate, but Meredith seemed to have forgotten about them, which was all to the good. The first refrigerator unit was just that, a nice Tohiro-Nikkonen that now needed very badly to be cleaned out. The second was a jury-rigged something—from the look on Hester's face, she had no more idea than Cynthia did. But next to that, back in the corner where it was awkward to reach, lower and bulkier—"That's it," Hester said. "Has to be."

"Can you figure out how to turn it on?" Cynthia said. She stole a glance at Fiorenzo—still seizing—and Meredith. Still… busy.

"Watch me," Hester said confidently and wiggled into the cramped space. "Or rather, don't watch me. Watch for company." And she passed Cynthia her pistol.

"You got it," Cynthia said, although it wasn't clear that the pistol would be any more use than a wedding bouquet if the reanimated found them and Charlie decided to open the doors.

Pursuant to that thought, she asked, "Can you communicate with him at all? Charlie, I mean?"

"I've tried," Hester said. "I don't know if it's just that I can't or that he doesn't recognize me as crew."

"Rats," Cynthia said. "Because it occurred to me that the best way to get rid of the reanimated would be for Charlie to eat them."

"Oh," said Hester. "Well. That would certainly be tidy. Although I'm not entirely sure that he could. It doesn't look to me as if Fiorenzo's reanimated can actually digest anything."

"Well, there goes that idea," Cynthia said. "But he could still chew on them, couldn't he?"

"If they went to his mouth. But he probably can't just… reabsorb them."

The *Charles Dexter Ward* shuddered again; Hester was knocked against the wall, and Cynthia ended up in a drunken sprawl against the galvanic motor.

"I think," Hester said dryly, "that something isn't quite right."

"Do you think that's what the second dose of serum was for?"

"Probably."

"Do you think without it, he'll die again?" Horrible, to sound so hopeful. Horrible, to be in a situation where that was the optimum outcome.

"Ngao hasn't," Hester said.

Cynthia was trying to think of an answer that was neither obscene nor dangerously blasphemous when motion caught her eye. She jerked around, but it wasn't Meredith or Ngao; it was a tove.

"There weren't any toves in here, were there?" They'd encountered a tove colony several corridors away from the morgue, thick on the ceiling and walls, and starting to creep across the floor. The smell cut through even the stench in Cynthia's nostrils, and she and Hester both had to fight not to gag at the crunch and lingering squish of toves under their boots.

"No," Hester said. "Why?"

Cynthia aimed carefully and shot the tove. "Just hurry up, okay?" All by themselves, toves weren't much more than a nuisance—at least, not to a healthy adult. But where toves went, raths were sure to follow, and raths were dangerous. And where raths went, would surely come bandersnatches, and while a bandersnatch could probably deal with Fiorenzo's mistakes, it would happily annihilate the rest of them as well.

"Fiorenzo's got it backward, you know," Hester said in a would-be-casual voice, instead of calling Cynthia on the evasion.

"Oh?" Cynthia said warily. Hester was under tremendous pressure and had just watched one member of her family murder another at extremely close range. Cynthia wouldn't blame her in the slightest for falling apart, but they desperately needed it not to be right now.

"The fresher the body, the worse the results," Hester said. "Meredith being Exhibit A. She must have reanimated Meredith within minutes."

Only as long as it takes to sew a head back on, Cynthia thought. Aloud, she said, "I see what you mean."

"So she's wrong," Hester said fiercely. "I had to say it to someone. The odds of having the opportunity to refute her theories in print…"

Cynthia wanted to close her eyes, but she had to keep watch on Meredith, Fiorenzo, Ngao… and everything else. She said, "I understand."

"Okay," Hester said, scrambling back to Cynthia's side. "The machine is drawing power, and I've started it cycling. Now we just have to attach the leads to Charlie's nervous system." She brandished a thick double-handful of cables, and Cynthia followed her gaze to the hole Fiorenzo had dug in the deck of the morgue, with Wandrei's remains on one side and Fiorenzo's rigor-stiff figure on the other. Ngao was standing patiently where Fiorenzo had left him. Meredith had moved to the door, which she was pawing at with obvious confusion. But she wasn't Charlie's crew; he wasn't opening it for her.

"Can't we just, I don't know, rip him open ourselves?"

"It would take too long," Hester said with a crispness that betrayed her own reluctance. "Besides, I don't have the specialized diagnostic equipment we'd need to find a node, and Fiorenzo must have cannibalized hers—or maybe left it somewhere."

Cynthia swallowed her arguments. "Okay. Will the cables reach?"

"I suspect that node is where she attached them the first time," Hester said. "But let's find out."

Hester paid the cables out carefully; Cynthia kept pace, trying to keep her attention on far too many threats at once. A cheshire's sixteen eyes had never sounded so good. Cynthia and Hester's movement attracted Meredith's attention, and she started in their direction, not in the all-out berserker charge of the other reanimated, but in that slow-seeming sidle that had lethally fooled Wandrei.

Cynthia shot her, aiming as best she could for the knee. They had learned, by the good old scientific method of try-it-and-find-out, that the pistol could not damage a reanimated corpse enough to unanimate it. But it could cripple one. The trick was to make sure any bits you knocked off were too small to do any damage when

they kept coming after you.

At this range, even Cynthia couldn't miss. Meredith didn't make a sound—she couldn't, with severed vocal cords—but the silent rictus of shock (pain? Cynthia wondered bleakly, betrayal?) was almost worse. She went down, and continued dragging herself forward—but her hands couldn't get much purchase on the deck plates protecting the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s tissue, especially slick as they were with Wandrei's fluids.

Hester had reached the dark and wetly shining hole. She knelt clumsily, then looked up, a brave if not very convincing effort at a smile on her face. "You'd better," she started; then voice and smile failed together, her face going slack with an emotion Cynthia couldn't identify—until a voice behind her, a grating, hollow snarl said, "Stop."

And then she knew, because she could feel her own face mirroring Hester's: it was horror.

Cynthia turned. Dr. Fiorenzo was struggling to her feet. She stretched. She examined her hands. She took a carotid pulse.

She smiled. "All it took," she said calmly, "was a fresh enough specimen. Really, Dr. Feuerwerker, you of all people should appreciate my success."

Cynthia stepped backward. Once, twice. She worried about stepping into the pit, about tripping over Hester. About edging too close to Meredith and her undead strength. But she couldn't take her eyes away from Fiorenzo. And she couldn't—viscerally couldn't—let Fiorenzo close the gap between them. No matter how sweet and reasonable she sounded.

Something brushed Cynthia's ankle. She almost squeezed off a shot—the last in the pistol—before realizing that it was Hester, mutely offering up the power cables. They were too thick to manage one-handed. Cynthia would have to let go of the gun.

"Not live," she said.

Hester said, "I'll worry about that."

Carefully, watching Fiorenzo the whole time, Cynthia handed Hester the gun and took the cables. They were heavy. How had Hester handled them so easily?

"Dr. Fiorenzo," she said. "Stop."

Fiorenzo took another step, but she was eyeing the cables cautiously. Cynthia was at the limit of their length, and the pit was behind her. She could retreat no farther.

"I assure you, I'm no threat," Fiorenzo said. "This process will save lives."

Cynthia heard Hester scrambling. Did she intend to get past Fiorenzo somehow? No, she was edging to the side, still keeping Cynthia as her buffer. *Thanks a lot.* But if their positions were reversed, would Cynthia be doing any differently?

"It will save your life," Fiorenzo said.

And lunged.

Her strength was incredible. Cynthia swung the cables against her head, again and again, until Fiorenzo pinioned her arms. They rolled to the floor. Fiorenzo landed on top. Fiorenzo's teeth worried at the seam of Cynthia's pressure suit; Cynthia got a foot up and kicked, but couldn't knock her off.

"Incoming!" Hester yelled. Fiorenzo's head jerked up, and Cynthia thought, *What damned good is –*

The report of the pistol would have been deafening in the confined space of the morgue, if not for Cynthia's suit filters. Fiorenzo thrashed for a second, the left side of her skull blossoming into a cratered exit wound. Cynthia threw herself free and rolled across the decking.

"Cables!" Hester yelled.

Cynthia grabbed them from the middle and yanked. The ends came slithering toward her, sparking against the deck. Heavy yellow sparks. Cynthia grabbed them by the insulation and lifted.

Fiorenzo rolled to a crouch, then stood. She laughed, one eye bobbing gently on the end of its optic nerve against her cheek. She sprang forward like a racer—

Cynthia jabbed the cables into her chest.

Fiorenzo arched back as the current went through her, hands splayed and clawing. She didn't scream; there was no other sound to cover the crack of electricity, the hiss of cooking flesh.

She slumped. Cynthia jumped backward, but Fiorenzo's

outflung hand still fell across her boot. She turned wildly; Meredith was still crawling toward her. Hester crouched by the controls, sliding the master switch back to off.

"Decomp tie-ins," Hester said. "You use the bolt nearest the panel." She stepped over Fiorenzo's corpse, her boot disturbing the gentle wisps of steam still rising, and dropped into the hole again. "And hand me the fucking cables again, would you please?"

Following orders was the easiest, most pleasant thing that Cynthia had ever done. She clipped and locked her safety line to the bolt. She slid the power control back to full.

"Do it!" she shouted to Hester.

And Hester must have done it, because the Charles Dexter Ward convulsed. Cynthia was jerked hard against her tether and then slammed back into the machine—and that was with only enough slack to attach the line. Everything unanchored went flying; she heard the crunch as Meredith hit a bulkhead, and then she was jerked forward again and blacked out.

§

She couldn't have been out for more than a minute, she reckoned later; she could hear things still cascading in thumps and crunches. But the ship himself was not moving, and more importantly, more tellingly, his necroluminescence was gone. The only light was Hester's suit lamp, and Cynthia fumbled her own on.

"Thank the ancient powers and the Buddha," Hester said in a thin fervent voice. "I thought you were dead."

Cynthia swallowed bright copper where she'd bitten the inside of her mouth. "Ow."

"Yes." Hester was undoing her safety line and dragging herself upright. Cynthia undid her own line with shaky fingers, and then her head cleared and she made it to her feet in one adrenaline-sour jerk. She twisted around, scanning, but Meredith was nowhere within the limited range of her light. She saw one of Ngao's legs and part of his spine; he had been torn apart by the force of Charlie's convulsions. As she watched, the foot twitched.

"Do you think we can make it back to the *Caitlín R. Kiernan* alive?" Hester said.

Cynthia squared her shoulders, wincing a little, and answered: "I think we can try."

Epilogue

In his (second) death throes, the *Charles Dexter Ward* had taken a chunk out of the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*, like a kid biting a chunk out of an apple. The casualties were five dead and thirteen injured, and they would have been worse except that everyone possible had been press-ganged into helping with the broken ward-mirror. The medical bay was gone, and now Cynthia knew why she'd only ever seen the one future-ghost, because there had only been one future path in which there was still a medical bay—the future path, she knew with cold uncomfortable certainty, in which she had not stood up to Wandrei and Fiorenzo, in which the *Charles Dexter Ward* had not died twice.

Cynthia patched up the crew as best she could with bandages made of cloth and splints repurposed from any number of functions, and the crew patched up the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*. The mass funeral was devastating; Cynthia stood with Hester and let Hester's grip leave bruises on her hand.

She bunked in with Hester, which was tight but doable. On her first sleep shift, after she finished brushing what she hoped was the last of the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s death stench out of her mouth, she came into Hester's room and found two smug cheshires in the hammock slung crossways above Hester's bunk. She surprised herself by bursting into tears.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she said, fending off Hester's concern. "I just didn't expect them to find me."

"They know you," Hester said, as if it were all that simple.

The *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* sent out a distress signal, and before leaving the *Charles Dexter Ward*, they set warning beacons around the boojum's carcass. The Universal Code didn't have an entry for REANIMATED; Hester told Cynthia that the Faculty

Senate passed a motion to submit a proposal to add it before agreeing that the best they could do for now was EPIDEMIC alternating with BANDERSNATCH, and trust that it would be dire enough to warn people away. And there was always the story, Cynthia thought, and that would do more good than a hundred beacons.

Their distress call was answered, less than a week out, by a liveship, the *Judith Merrill*, and her crew lost nearly all their native distrust of Arkhamers in their desire for the details—Cynthia, as a non-Arkhamer, was pestered nearly to death. But she was willing to tell the story as often as necessary to make people believe it, and she knew perfectly well that half the reason she got so many questions was the Judith Merrill's crew double-checking what the Arkhamers told them. Everyone knew Arkhamers lied.

She was amused, though, and also touched that their greatest concern was for what Fiorenzo had done to the *Charles Dexter Ward*. They were fiercely protective of their ship, and while they were horrified by the idea of Fiorenzo reanimating the dead, it was Charlie they wanted to lynch her for. It was the wreck of the *Charles Dexter Ward* that was going to make the story, and Fiorenzo would be merely its villain, not a scientist striving—however wrong-headedly—for knowledge.

With the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* in a cargo bay, Cynthia and Hester (and a random assortment of cheshires) were sharing a dormitory cubicle somewhere under the *Judith Merrill*'s left front fin. The purser had offered to put Cynthia somewhere else, but she had turned him down. Until they reached Faraday Station, her contract bound her to the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica*. And even after that, friendship would bind her to Hester.

And, the bare truth was, she didn't want to try to sleep alone.

When Cynthia reached their cubicle at the start of her next sleep shift, she said, "What makes forbidden knowledge forbidden, anyway?"

Hester looked up with visible alarm.

"No, I haven't found another Mi-Go canister," Cynthia said, amazed to find that she was able to joke about it. "I was just thinking

about Fiorenzo and, well, how do you figure out where to draw the line? Because apparently I don't know."

"You do know," Hester said. "You knew Fiorenzo was wrong before I did."

"I knew Fiorenzo was suicidal. That's not quite the same thing."

"No," Hester said. "You looked at Ngao and you knew it was wrong. You saw the person suffering first, not the scientific achievement."

Cynthia winced. She had looked up Major Ngao—Major Kirawat Ngao, R.N. M.Sc.—but had had to draw back from attempting to contact his next of kin. What could she say? *I'm sorry your loved one was murdered and reanimated by an unscrupulous scientist, and is still animate and possibly conscious – though in pieces – in the belly of a dead boojum?* That was rank cruelty.

It was Ngao and the rest of the *Charles Dexter Ward*'s crew that she still felt worst about; Charlie himself was at least peacefully dead—even the pseudoghosts had faded out before the *Jarmulowicz Astronomica* was picked up by the *Judith Merrill*, showing that the spacetime disruptions were healing. But the reanimated were trapped in their dead ship, and the best that could be hoped for was that Fiorenzo's serum might someday wear off.

"Someday," which might just be another word for "never."

"You said yourself," Hester continued, pursuing the argument and jarring Cynthia out of a sad and pointless spiral of thought, "that you wouldn't put anyone in a canister, and I suspect you wouldn't have experimented at all if it had still had a brain in it."

"No," Cynthia said, then muttered rebelliously, "I still think we could find really valuable applications for the knowledge."

"Which is exactly what we told you about Fiorenzo," Hester said.

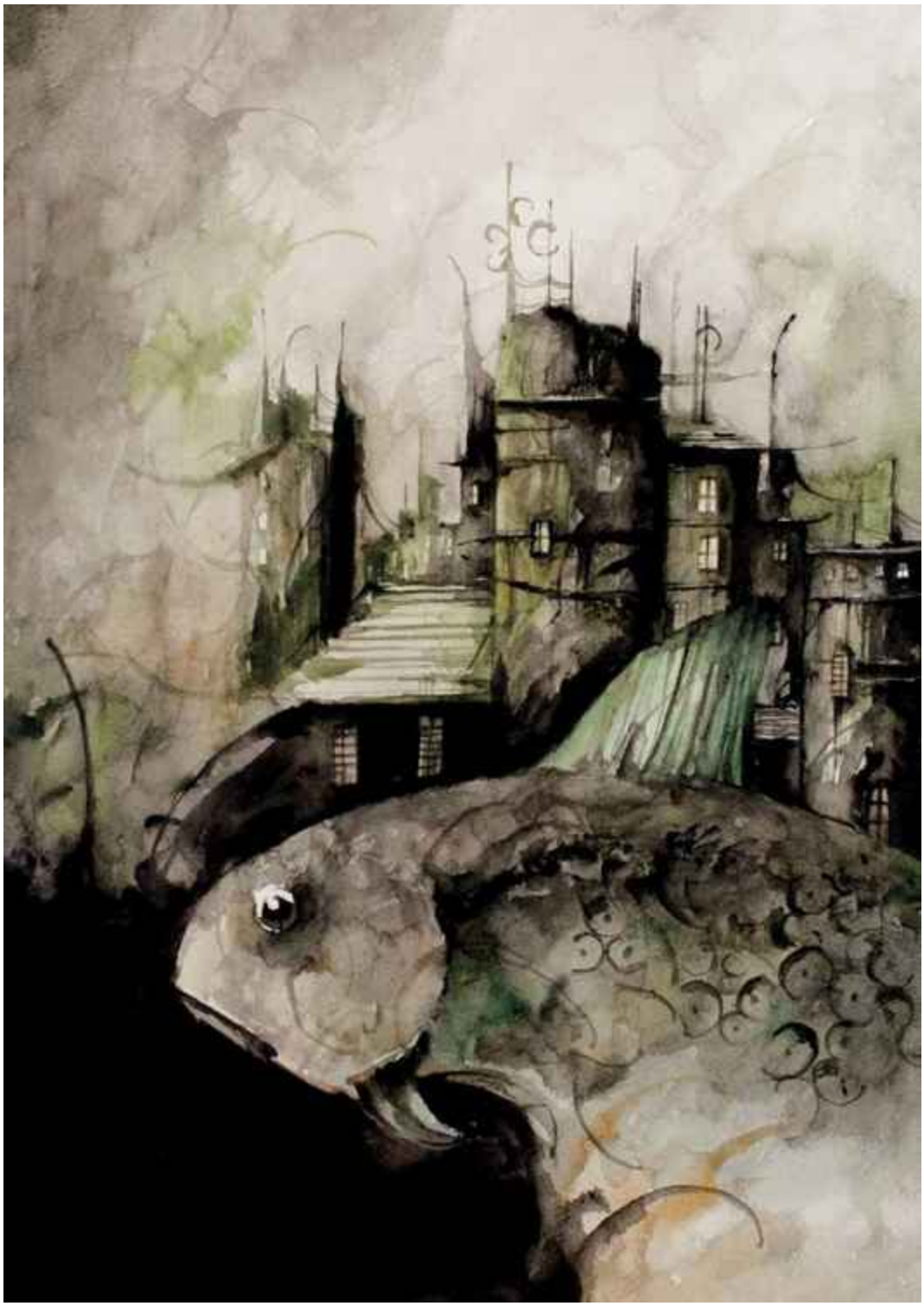
"Ouch," Cynthia said. She swung into her hammock and rearranged the cheshires to give her space.

"Mostly, I've always thought 'forbidden knowledge' was another way of saying, 'don't do that or the bandersnatches will get you,'" Hester pursued thoughtfully. "Or, I suppose, the Mi-Go."

"Which is frequently true," Cynthia said.

"Yes, but it never stops us." Hester looked up at Cynthia, her eyes dark. "Maybe that's the worst part of human nature. Nothing ever stops us. Not for long."

"Not for long," Cynthia agreed and petted the tentacled horror on her lap until it cuddled close and began to purr.



From the Cold Dark Sea

Storm Constantine

The house stood on a cold finger of land that poked out grudgingly into a sullen sea. Cara could see it from far off, because the peninsula appeared scoured of life, covered only by heather and wiry grass, with the occasional salt-stunted tree—leaning sorrowfully away from the winds—and lichen-covered rocks. The house was square, bereft of gardens, ornate or otherwise. There wasn't even a fence, just a narrow, neglected road, full of holes, and an enormous backdrop of miserable sky, where sinister spirals of rain cloud pushed blackly down over the far ocean.

Cara's car whined as it negotiated the bumps and pot holes. She passed a solitary wooden post, from which colorless tattered ribbons hung. Surely not the site of an accident? Any driver would have to aim very carefully at that post to hit it. She grimaced, fumbled on the dashboard for a cigarette, the last she would smoke before leaving the car.

A commission had come from the house, Maples, asking for a book restorer—Cara's specialty. Since leaving university ten years ago, her job had taken her to many hidden corners of the country, to dim museums and crumbling houses with wormy libraries. Mrs. De La Mere, the inhabitant of Maples, had contacted Cara via a letter handwritten on creamy headed notepaper. Usually her clients got in touch with her by e-mail and, if not, letters were typed. Mrs. De La Mere was concerned about the condition of a valuable family heirloom and included two photos with the letter: grainy pictures of a huge old book. But—the older the better, as far as Cara was concerned. There was more chance of restoring an ancient book that had been created before the acids of relatively modern paper-making had doomed books to a finite life.

Cara finished her cigarette on the front drive of Maples, while her car ticked and cooled. She could hear the wind beyond the car

windows, its voice rising and falling in bitter song. Mean rain, menaced by the spiteful squalls, rendered the scene blurry and vague, like a watercolor painting. Drenched and somber, Maples was a gaunt-looking residence; two turrets and constructed entirely of dark stone. Cara imagined it would feel arthritic inside, with unstable banisters and groaning stairs, a haunting of creaks and sighs. Also, houses simply didn't look right if they had no garden. Not far from it, the sea pounced against the cliffs and savaged them, perhaps goring away the finger of land so that one day Maples would fall into the bullying waves. *Maples*. What a stupid name for a house where no trees grew.

Cara got out of her car, locked it, and went to the front door that stood above three worn steps of black slate. She lifted the bulky brass knocker, which had apparently been polished fairly recently, and let it fall three slow times. She wondered with some amusement what apparition would eventually shamble forth to answer her.

The door opened. A tall, teenaged girl stood there, dressed as if she'd expected the day to be warmer than it was—red shorts and a lime green T-shirt with a cartoon duck print on it. Her greeny-blond hair was tied in a pony-tail. Her feet were bare. How disappointingly ordinary.

"Hi," Cara said. "I'm the book restorer. Cara Milltop."

The girl nodded vaguely. "Come in."

Cara entered the hallway, which was naturally dark, it seemed, but lit by a sufficient array of wall lamps. Stairs rose majestically, branching at the foot of an immense stained-glass window. Overhead a chandelier hung, with coldly glittering pendants. The wood paneling on every wall was intricately carved. The hall was beautiful—in a Gothic, fairy-tale kind of way. "Amazing," Cara said feebly, her head thrown back to squint at the vaulted ceiling high above. She peered at the colorful window at the point where the stairs divided, seeing now that it depicted a seascape hectic with storms, a great ship rolling, mermaids clawing its sides, taking drowned sailors into their embrace. "That's dramatic," Cara said, pointing.

The girl smiled as if she didn't care. "Yeah, guess so. It's my

grandmother you want."

She began to walk away, then paused, turned to see if Cara was following her. Cara blinked quizzically.

"This way," said the girl.

§

Cara found that the house wasn't completely without garden, as when she entered the room where the reigning matriarch awaited her, she could see a walled yard through the long windows. She glimpsed a washing-line bearing a few wooden pegs, turned earth with garden implements, straggling growth.

"Ms. Milltop," announced the elderly woman seated by the hearth. A fire burned there, licking wood as an elderly dog might lick its own paws. The woman sat straight-backed, blessed with remarkable bones that anchored beauty still to her narrow face.

Cara strode forward, hand extended. "Mrs. De La Mere," she responded, smiling.

The woman indicated the seat opposite her with a pale graceful hand. "Do take off your coat and sit down." She gestured at the girl who was loitering at the door. "Judy, put the kettle on, dear. Make us tea."

The door closed.

Cara removed her jacket and put it carefully over the back of the chair. She sat, in what she hoped conveyed businesslike purpose.

"It's the damp that's always a problem," said Mrs. De La Mere. She sighed, stroked her coifed silvery hair. "Well, you must know that."

"The book…"

"Yes, *Marvels of the Deeps*. It's been in our family for perhaps hundreds of years. I understand it's quite valuable. The children have always loved it. The illustrations, you see."

"Like the window in the hall? That's quite stunning."

Mrs. De La Mere nodded vaguely. "Yes, that sort of thing. It's a shame when something so beautiful and so *meaningful* to children can no longer be handled. Is there anything you can do?"

"Well, naturally I'll need to see the book first, make an assessment."

"Oh yes, of course."

"But the good news is that the older a book is, the healthier it can be. It's because of how paper was made. Wood pulp is flimsy in comparison to the old linen-based paper. That can withstand quite a lot and is more amenable to being restored."

"I see. Well, I hope that's the case." Mrs. De La Mere paused. "Do you love your work, Ms. Milltop?"

Cara nodded. "I know I'm privileged to have this job, and yes, I love it very much."

"I imagine it's similar to working in a beauty parlor—restoring old things."

Cara wasn't sure whether that was a joke.

Mrs. De Le Mere grinned. "It's quite all right. I'm not asking you to restore me!"

Cara laughed uncertainly. "I suppose it is, in a way."

The girl Judy was swift with the tea. It didn't come in delicate ancient tea cups, but sturdy modern mugs, each with a different print. Mrs. De La Mere talked a little about the house and the village —Mordarras—nearby. Cara listened but didn't feel as if she was actually hearing anything. Perhaps she was more tired than she felt.

§

The library of Maples seemed tall as a cathedral. The De La Meres were certainly a family of bibliophiles. Cara itched to explore every shelf. Book cases rose to a mezzanine where more books huddled in shadow. Sliding ladders reared on three sides of the room. "I used to adore swinging on these when I was a girl," said Mrs. De La Mere, gently fingering the satiny wood of one of the ladders. "We all did."

She indicated the way to a table where the muted colors of another stained-glass extravaganza—an abstract pattern rather than a picture—splashed over the wood. Here, the family treasure, *Marvels of the Deeps*, lay waiting for Cara's attention. It was as big as a Bible. Cara opened her work satchel and drew out a pair of latex

gloves, and also her dictaphone and other instruments she might need during her preliminary inspection. She put on the gloves and turned on her machine. "Book title *Marvels of the Deeps*," she began. "Dimensions approximately 30 centimeters width, 40 centimeters height. Thickness 8 centimeters."

"How very *forensic*," murmured Mrs. De La Mere.

Cara smiled reassuringly at the woman. "I just like to keep thorough notes and record progress. It's not an autopsy."

"Well, I would hope not." Mrs. De La Mere laughed charmingly.

Cara laid her fingers lightly against the front cover board. This appeared to be made of leather, originally dyed dark green and embossed with gold, but now faded. Almost all of the embossing had gone. There was also staining to the cover, perhaps water damage. Reverently, Cara opened the book. The first folio was severely spotted and clearly suffering disintegration. The book hadn't been stored correctly. And yes, as Mrs. De La Mere had suggested, damp had had its way with the ancient fibers. Happily the binding appeared still strong; as far as Cara could tell, the book would not need rehinging. She used felt-tipped tongs to turn the page. The book certainly predated the mid-nineteenth century, when new paper-making methods had brought in the dreaded death sentence of fiber-destroying acids; but at first glance, she wasn't entirely sure the base material had been linen.

"Is it rescuable?" Mrs. De La Mere asked tremulously, as if enquiring about the health of a frail relative.

Cara flashed a smile at her. "I'm sure I can do something." She paused. "Really, Mrs. De La Mere, this book should be stored under careful conditions. If you want children to play with it, I'd advise getting a copy made for them."

"Oh, but that wouldn't be the same…"

"I know, but this book is really too old to be handled by little fingers. No one should touch this without wearing gloves, like I'm doing." She turned the blank page that had followed the title page. "Oh!"

"Yes," breathed Mrs. De La Mere.

Even though the folio itself was ancient and delicate, the woodcut upon it was still dark and clear, printed with thick, shining black ink. Staring at the picture was like looking down a tunnel deep beneath the ocean, rocks to either side thickly gemmed with anemone growths and crystals. Weeds hung like drapes, drawn back to reveal the path. Paler shapes suggestive of eyes winked between the weeds. Was that a tiny hand reaching out? And at the distant end of the path, soft rays of light, an intimation of space and height. Anyone looking at that page would want to go further, to see the end of the path, to walk it. The pages beyond were the portals to this secret place.

Cara carefully closed the book. "It's late now," she said, "I'd like to examine the book properly and start work tomorrow. Hopefully the light will be better. I like to work in natural light. Is there a hotel you can recommend in Mordarras?"

"Don't be silly, dear," said Mrs. De La Mere, making a sweeping gesture with both arms. "You can see the size of this place. You will of course stay here for however long it takes."

"Well… thank you," Cara said.

§

Judy showed Cara to a room upstairs that had windows in two walls, one overlooking the walled garden, the other providing a dramatic view of the sea. It was a pleasant, airy room—in spite of the dull weather—although somewhat featureless, almost as if Cara had walked into a generic hotel.

"We keep this for guests," Judy said, as if sensing Cara's disappointment not to find herself in a gloomy, shadowed chamber.

"Do you get a lot of guests?" Cara couldn't help asking, depositing her luggage bag on the bed.

Judy shrugged. "At some times of year. We have a big family."

"This must be when the children come," Cara said, "the ones who like the book."

"Yeah." Judy paused, then said, "There's a bathroom a little way down the passage to your right. Hot water whenever you need

it, but if you want a bath, better wait. We'll be eating soon. Shall I call you?"

"Yes. Please."

Left alone, Cara stood at the window, staring out across the ocean. The sounds that came muted to her ears were soporific, the plunge of the waves, the wail of the winds.

§

At dinner, Cara ate what she could only describe as a *polite* meal of roasted chicken breast, with what tasted like home-grown vegetables, full of flavor. Not exactly exciting or exotic, but well-cooked and satisfying. For dessert there was honeycomb ice cream, which Mrs. De La Mere explained was made on a farm near Mordarras. "The girls from Morbenyn Farm help us out here," she said. "It's a big house for the two of us."

"Has it been in your family a long time?" This was a question Cara often asked, a staple of her conversation with clients.

"Oh yes, a very long time. Our ancestors were seafarers, you know."

After dinner, Mrs. De La Mere wanted to show Cara DVDs of the local area, mainly because Maples was mentioned a couple of times as being something of a curio. Cara was conducted to a large comfortable sitting room, somewhat overfurnished in a Victorian manner, but dominated by an immense, flat-screen TV. Mrs. De La Mere used a series of remote controls expertly and swiftly in order to begin the presentation. In one film, she was interviewed, standing regally before her domain on a bright sunny day, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. All she had to say was that in the summer Maples offered cream teas and that several of the rooms in the house were then open to the public. The hall, apparently, was faintly famous for its carvings and window. The camera panned round to show tables set out on the flat ground in front of the house. No one was sitting there. Mordarras was also featured; a typically picturesque Cornish village huddling in a deep hole beneath the cliffs as if it had fallen there. The single road that led through it was punishingly steep to

either side. But there wasn't anything that interesting in the documentaries, which were clearly aimed at tourists who wanted only an animated guidebook to take them to pretty spots and tell them where to eat, where to stand to view the sea.

Mrs. De La Mere was lavish with her sherry while they watched, so that Cara felt quite inebriated by ten o'clock. "Do you mind if I turn in?" she asked. "It was a long journey today."

"Not at all. You go ahead." Mrs. De La Mere poured herself another sherry. "Judy can wake you. Not too early. We're not early risers."

§

Cara dreamed of the illustration she had seen in the book. This wasn't of some fantastical journey, swimming down through the ocean deeps, but merely of standing in the library, staring at the picture and saying aloud to someone unseen behind her, "but there must be a way to it, there must."

She woke up in darkness, pulled abruptly from sleep by what she could only describe as a racket. This was a rhythmic clacking, thumping sound, which as she listened, became faster in tempo until it was a wall-shaking rattle. "What the hell?" she said aloud and leaned over to turn on the bedside light. She glanced around the room, unnerved, but not exactly frightened. She saw that despite the relative modernity of the fittings, the radiator in the room was of the ancient cast-iron type. The noise came from that. Cara got out of bed and went to touch the radiator, which was mildly warm. Her fingers registered a faint vibration that surely should have been greater. The noise was so loud. And then it wasn't. The room fell silent. Cara looked out through the open curtains. The night was overcast, drizzle still falling. And yet it seemed the sea was glowing. She watched this for some five minutes, even took some photos on her phone. Then she returned to bed and slept till morning.

§

"It's the pipes," Judy supplied, rather unhelpfully, when Cara mentioned the noises in the night. Judy had come at 9:30 to rouse Cara, who had already been awake.

"Well, I gathered that, but it sounded like your boiler was about to explode."

Judy stood in the middle of the room, hands stuffed into the pockets of cut-off jeans. "It comes through the pipes," she said, "from the sea."

"The sea?"

"Gets amplified, I guess. Knocking and that. It won't blow up."

"*What* comes through the pipes?"

"Just sounds from the sea. Waves, water moving things." Judy shrugged. "Our drains go into it, so the sounds come back up. Always been like that."

The explanation seemed plausible, and of course old buildings were renowned for temperamental plumbing arrangements. But Cara plunged on, refusing to be deterred by Judy's dismissive tone. "The sea, too… it was strange, but when I looked out of my window it appeared to be glowing, as if lit from beneath."

"Algae," Judy said abruptly. "They let off light. Sometimes."

"Oh." Cara paused, then added brightly, "That must be where lots of old legends spring from—lights beneath the sea."

"Yeah," said Judy. She smiled insincerely—apparently bored—and turned to leave the room, Cara following.

§

Mrs. De La Mere wasn't at breakfast. Judy, draped awkwardly yet strangely graceful in her seat at the table, rather like an unstrung puppet, explained that her grandmother liked to have her morning meal in bed. There were boiled eggs, cooked to perfection, thick-sliced brown bread, laid in a basket upon a paper towel, and a glass dish of dark yellow butter. All this produce, Judy said, came from Morbenyn Farm.

After breakfast, Cara went directly to the library. She'd left her tools laid out neatly there. The day wasn't much brighter than the

one before, but when Cara turned on a desk lamp it threw a powerful, interrogatory light over the table. She drew on her gloves and examined the book's cover more carefully. She had cellulose products that could help restore its condition and luster, even if the embossing was lost for good. The interior pages could be subtly laminated with professional tissue, which would protect them while being almost invisible. She had been called upon in time. The invalid could be nursed to health. Before starting her gentle therapy, however, Cara wanted to look through the book. She stared once again at the opening illustration, the invitation to explore. A tunnel of weed and rock, hiding shy inhabitants, who watched the viewer as their eyes strayed down the path. At the end? A suggestion of ruins or a huge building of some kind, but so faint within the light it was impossible to discern details.

Cara turned the page. On the left folio was text, heavily printed in dense black ink, but in a language with which she wasn't familiar. She didn't recognize many of the characters. They weren't Russian or Greek, but around half were similar to Latin letters. She must ask Mrs. De La Mere about that. Her eyes wandered to the illustration on the right hand page. She'd deliberately kept her gaze from it until that moment. There was the city beneath the sea, to which the path had led her. She was gazing at it from the mouth of the tunnel, from which curtains of weed hung down, half obscuring her view. But now she could glimpse towers and staircases, colonnades and balconies. She could not see people, of any kind, but fishes in abundance—some seeming to fly in blurred flocks like birds, others swimming stately and alone; huge, and adorned in gowns of fins.

She turned the page. Now she had stepped beyond the mouth of the tunnel onto a paved pathway. The stones were inlaid with shells and crystals, depicting stylized sea creatures and curling waves. She could see now that the entire city was walled. Sentinel statues, as tall as three storied buildings, stood guard at the immense gates, which were slightly ajar. The statues had the torsos of men, but their heads hung down so you could not see their faces, and were further obscured by swathes of weedlike hair that fell to their waists. Below that, they were *of* the sea; not with fish tails, like

mermen, but a mass of squidlike tentacles. These creatures were not fearsome but to be respected. She did not want to wake them.

Cara turned the page. She was right by the statues now, close to the alluringly barely open gates. The portal was made of stone, and carved with octopi rampant—that was the only way she could describe them. On each looming panel a creature faced inward, four of its tentacles raised toward its partner on the other gate.

Cara put her hand upon the stone, then jumped, as if woken abruptly from sleep. "What?" she said aloud. She'd *been* there, just for an instant. Not merely looking at a picture, but ready to push open the gates. How evocative these old illustrations were. They'd drawn her in that much. She took a step back from the table.

For several long seconds she stood motionless. Her head was aching slightly. Then she became aware of a presence, another living thing, and her gaze snapped to the doorway. She couldn't suppress a small cry and jumped in alarm. A young woman stood at the threshold; tall, thin, with a small, round head. Her pale hair streamed to her waist and she wore a long ocean-green dress. Her large, rather protuberant eyes were fixed on Cara. For some agonizing moments Cara thought this person wasn't real, couldn't be, but then the woman said. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Would you like some tea? Just making some for the missus."

"Oh…" Cara shook her head. "Sorry, I was miles away. Yes, that's kind of you."

The woman smiled. She had a wide mouth. "I'll bring a tray."

Was she beautiful or hideous? Cara truly couldn't say. Arresting, perhaps. Strange.

Cara closed the book; she would begin work upon the cover. As she mixed her cellulose paste, the woman returned, gliding into the room like one of those peculiar catwalk models who were striking to behold, yet not anyone's idea of conventionally pretty. She did not seem to be the sort of person who would serve tea, or indeed engage in any menial task.

She appeared curious about what Cara was doing, peering somewhat indirectly, perhaps to be polite, so Cara felt she should say something. She held up her pot of cellulose mixture. "This is to

mend the cover. The paste will soak gently into the leather without damaging it, simply binding its fibers, protecting them." She smiled, not comfortable enough to look directly into the woman's round-eyed stare. "It won't look new but it will be strong again." She risked a quick glance. "You work here, then?"

"I help," said the woman.

"You're from the farm, Morbenyn."

"That's right. We help out." She smiled in her oddly face-stretching way. "I'm Minny."

"Cara," Cara said, managing not to laugh at the other woman's name, which was so inappropriate it didn't sound feasible. "This is a very beautiful book."

"It is. We're very glad there are people like you to save it." Minny laughed in an entirely normal way, which coming from her seemed completely odd. "Oh, what does that sound like? It's not *our* book, of course, but the legends mean a lot to us around here. The old sea stories. And they're not saved anywhere, are they, some of the old legends?"

"I know what you mean. It's horrible to think how many wonderful stories are just lost." Cara pointed at the book. "Disintegrating away in old libraries."

Minny nodded. "Well, happily this will not be one of them."

"So…" Cara began carefully. "This book is about a local legend?"

"The deep city, yes."

" I thought at first it would just be about marine life and so on."

"Well, it is that too. Perhaps half the species are dead now."

"A very old legend, then."

"Oh yes, very old." Minny straightened up. "Sugar?"

"Yes, just a little bit." Cara inspected the woman as she poured out the tea. She could be a mermaid herself, with that pale coloring, the streaming hair, and—it had to be said—somewhat fishlike features. Did this indicate inbreeding?

"Do you know what the language is, in this book?" Cara asked as Minny handed her a mug. "It doesn't look like old Cornish."

"It's a dead language now," Minny replied.

"From what part of the world?"

"Oh, far away. I don't know, really. No one does."

"Where did the book come from?"

"It's been in the De La Mere family for a long time, that's all I know. They were seafaring people."

"But you said it was a local legend…"

"It is." Minny grinned widely again. "Well, perhaps legends repeat themselves, in different places. I'm not sure where the book came from exactly. You'll have to ask the missus if you want to know more."

"Well, I'm just being curious. I don't need to know the book's history to restore it. I just think it's so fascinating."

Minny nodded. "The pictures are magical. I loved them when I was little. The missus always lets the children look at them."

The book didn't look like a children's book to Cara, mainly because the era in which it appeared to have been made didn't tend to produce books specifically for children. Still, it had illustrations, and to many people a book with pictures was for the young.

By lunchtime, Cara had finished work on the cover and left it to settle for the rest of the day. She was still curious about what else the book contained, but would have to leave further exploration until tomorrow.

Judy called Cara to a modest lunch of sausage rolls and tea. The weather had cleared somewhat; at least the rain had stopped. "I'm thinking of going into the village this afternoon," Cara said.

Judy nodded disinterestedly, nibbling at her food. Cara wondered about the girl. Where were her parents? Why wasn't she at school or college or at work? Did she live off her grandmother?

"Are there any local sites of interest?" Cara asked.

Judy shrugged. "Not really."

Determinedly, Cara said, "Perhaps you could tell me something about the book I'm working on? It seems to have a history!" She laughed a little.

"It's just a relic," Judy said.

Cara gave up any pretense of conversation and finished her lunch.

§

A winding lane led down to Mordarras, past the Morbenyn Farm. A sharp wind hurried clouds across the sky, making the watery sunlight dappled. Early spring flowers groped for light beside the path. Above, seabirds surfed the air, uttering those bleating cries that always reminded Cara of childhood holidays. Did people still have holidays like that? A hotel at a seaside resort, buckets and spades, ice cream melting over cardboardy cones? Cara's walking boots crunched upon the loose gravel of the lane. Gorse bushes spiked the sides of the roads stiffly. And to her left, far below, surged the sea. Mordarras was held in a circle of rock providing a natural harbor. It looked bleak, though, small white buildings cowering beneath the black cliffs. Perhaps in summer it was different. Cara hoped there would be a café she could sit in; she'd brought a novel with her.

Halfway to the village, she heard the hard tap of horses' hooves behind her, paused and turned. A pony and trap was approaching; how quaint. Cara saw it was driven by Minny from the farm. The woman pulled the pony to a halt. "Want a lift, m'love?"

"Oh… oh yes, thank you." Cara climbed up beside the driver. "I've never had a ride in one of these."

"People take the car, don't they," the woman said, "even when it's two steps down the road. What's the rush?"

"It's far nicer to go to the village like this," Cara said. "Thanks, Minny."

The woman laughed. "Oh, I'm not Minny, I'm Tally."

Cara stared at her.

"Her sister," the woman said. "Twin."

Cara shook her head. "Sorry, the resemblance is… well, of course I've only met your sister today."

"Our own people still make the mistake," Tally said amiably.

"I'm Cara…"

"Yes," Tally interrupted, "she told me."

The café was still closed for the season, but Tally said that the

local postmistress served tea to visitors. “Not that we get many at this time of year, but I take a cup with Sissy when I’m in town.”

Cara suppressed a smile. *Sissy. Town.* She didn’t need a novel to read; she was in one.

Tally dropped her by the door to the post office. “If you want a lift back up, I’ll be an hour or so.”

“No, that’s fine, thank you. I could do with the walk.” Cara patted her stomach.

Tally stretched a wide-lipped smile, clucked to her pony, and moved on.

§

Sissy the postmistress was clearly a relative of the Morbenyn mermaids, since she shared the same appearance, except she was older and wore her hair in a neat bun. Also, her eyes bulged so much, she seemed not to blink. Cara half-expected a nictitating membrane to slip across Sissy’s eyes. Like the others, she was friendly and perhaps bored, all alone in her shop in the empty season. The makeshift tea room amenities comprised two small tables at the back of the store, with chairs crammed round them. It quickly became clear that Cara would not be allowed time to read in silence. “How’s your work going?” Sissy asked, looming gauntly over the table. *Really, these specimens should be secretive and aloof*, Cara thought. Their sociability seemed incongruous, but then, she reflected, *most fishes swim in schools*. At least now she could look them square in the face and not feel faintly freaked.

“Oh, the treatment is going well,” Cara said. “Does Mrs. De La Mere make the book available to tourists in the summer? It seems quite a local celebrity, in its way.”

“Oh no,” Sissy said, “it’s not for them. The children like it. Do you have any children?”

“No.” Cara hoped the hardness of the word would stem any further enquiries down that path. She decided to make some of her own. “Does Judy De La Mere have no parents?”

Sissy’s wide mouth opened and closed a few times. “The missus

is all she has now," she said dramatically.

Perhaps they drowned out in the bay, Cara thought, rather maliciously, and wished she could ask, but realized the question might be offensive.

§

Leaving the post office earlier than she planned, because Sissy refused to leave her alone and wanted to witter on about the problems of running the place, Cara decided to explore the village. Rain clouds had begun to threaten the horizon again. She hoped they'd hold off, or perhaps she should seek out Tally for a lift home shortly. There were hardly any people about. The shops, mostly for tourists, were closed. Small houses clung to the cliff walls like barnacles, and there were lights in the windows of some of them. Cara saw figures down on the beach, perhaps shellfish-gathering, as they were stooped over rock pools, panniers hanging from their shoulders. All of them were women—from a distance appearing tall and strong, their long legs clad in heavy thigh-length boots. Cara hadn't seen a single male since arriving at Maples the day before, but then she'd hardly been out. Perhaps the men worked away in a larger town.

§

Later over dinner, Mrs. De La Mere—again fortified by sherry—offered more information about her family. "In days gone by, there were fortunes to be made," she said. "De La Meres brought many strange and wonderful things home from their travels and used to sell them. Not here, of course—not much call—but in the towns, and even up in London."

"And your book came to you in this way?" Cara asked, then added, "Minny said it depicted a local legend, though."

Mrs. De La Mere laughed. "Well, not exactly that. There is a local story of a city beneath the sea, but then there are stories all over the world like that. The families here like to think the book is about

this area, *their* sea, but that's romance, isn't it?"

"The language in the book," Cara said, "I didn't recognize it."

"No one does," said Mrs. De La Mere.

"Have you ever thought of having the book examined by experts?"

"I understood *you* were an expert." Mrs. De La Mere's tone was somewhat tart.

"I meant someone who knows languages, antiquity… Aren't you curious?"

"It's a much-loved old book that means a lot to my family and, as you have seen, to others. I don't want *experts* tramping about, thinking they know it all, and I wouldn't let *Marvels* leave this house."

Cara sensed the slight hostility entering the conversation, inspired, she thought, by the drink. "Of course, that's understandable," she said in a soothing tone. "I'll start work on the pages tomorrow. It'll soon be mended."

§

Cara went to bed early to read her novel, but she couldn't concentrate on the words. She had always made up stories in her mind, and a new one was forming now, of a town comprised of peculiar land-walking mermaids, where there were no men, and a sacred book resided in a wind-scoured old house on the cliffside. The lady who lived there was the guardian of this book and her grand-daughter? What role did she play in this story?

Laying her open book facedown on the bed, Cara blinked at the ceiling. The grand-daughter must be the oracle, the sea priestess, and at night the sea moaned, lit up, and something came from it.

Cara smiled to herself. *Yes, that idea worked*. She turned off her bedside light and turned onto her side. After some minutes, the tapping began.

Roused from a half sleep, Cara lay for some time listening to the hollow knockings from the radiator. They sounded too regular to be random noises from the plumbing, and were softer than what she'd

heard the previous night. She turned on her light again and padded across the room to the radiator. *Tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap.* Pause. *Tap.* She ran her fingers over the rugged, painted metal, which was again comfortably warm. Almost without thinking, she rapped back: *Tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap.* This was repeated to her. She shook her head, remembering then how when she was young, staying with her cousins, they had communicated with each other like this at night, pretending to be secret agents. Code through the radiators. Now she rapped out a different code: *Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap.* And it was sent back to her.

Could this be Judy? She doubted Mrs. De La Mere would be responsible.

Cara rapped again, a more complicated rhythm, but all was silent. She looked out of the window at the sea, but it wasn't shining.

§

At breakfast, Cara told Judy bluntly. "I heard the noises in the radiator again last night. And the strangest thing was, when I made the same tappings, they were copied, sent back to me."

Judy glanced up from her meal inscrutably. "You think so?"

"That's what it sounded like."

Judy shrugged. "Well, I doubt it was."

No further interrogation seemed possible.

§

In the library, Cara was pleased to see that her work the previous day had been successful. The cover boards looked good—not new, of course, but *restored*, which was the idea. Now she could start work on the pages. Reverently, she opened the book. She would resist looking through it now, but would discover each illustration as she worked. She laid out her materials and plugged her small Teflon iron into the nearest wall socket to heat up. Then, from a package of protective sheets, she peeled a single tissue, which she trimmed to the relevant size. This she laid carefully over the first page. When

her iron was ready, she applied it to the tissue gently but firmly, so that resins within it were released and adhered subtly to the fibers beneath. What odd fibers they were too. When the page had cooled, she turned it and bent down to peer at the other side. It wasn't fashioned from wood pulp, that was obvious, but neither did it seem to have the exact consistency of linen, or any plant derived fiber. Some kind of treated animal skin? Yet the laminate had behaved as if it had been applied to a linen paper page. Must be that, just somehow altered by storage conditions and age.

Pausing to allow some time to gaze upon the illustrations she'd seen previously, Cara worked to the point where she reached a new picture.

Beyond the city gates, a wide avenue of tall, branching corals, like a processional way, unrolled before her. Ahead, an immense building reared. It was roughly pyramidal, but built of tiers. Statues similar to those at the gate guarded its walls. They were almost angelic, Cara thought, but for their obviously aquatic features.

She turned the page.

This building was a temple, she could see that now, and she had reached the steps that led to its yawning entrance. Beyond was only darkness. But from within, faint sounds emerged, chanting perhaps, or singing.

As on the day before, Cara jerked from the dreamlike state she was in, finding herself in reality. And didn't a faint song still tantalize her ears? She went quickly to the stained-glass window, put her hands against it. No, too indistinct to hear now. The sounds must have been the wind, the distant waves. Her grandmother used to say to her: *Too imaginative, young lady. That's your trouble.* Cara had always preferred make-believe to reality. As an adult, she hid this more effectively than she had as a child.

At this point Minny manifested at the doorway, today already carrying a tray of tea things. She came silently, but Cara was aware of her arrival, nonetheless. "Hi," she said, turning from the window, "I thought I heard something. Like singing."

Minny glided to the table and put down the tray. "They say that seals can sing," she said, and smiled. "You've been looking at the

pictures. Don't get lost in our old book, now, will you?"

"I think I already am," Cara said with a laugh that sounded too bright, too loud.

Minny smiled back as she poured the tea. "They weave a spell, that's for sure. When we were girls we were always playing in that world, down on the shore."

"You look like a mermaid," Cara said, unable to stop the words. She was pushing the story, she knew. Perhaps this was unwise.

Minny's smile widened to a grin. She lifted her long skirt a little, struck a pose with dainty feet. "You see, no fish tail. Don't be disappointed."

"Maybe you can change, shed your skin," Cara said.

"Maybe I can," Minny said mischievously. "May I see what you've done?"

Cara returned to the table and showed Minny the first few pages she'd laminated.

"Oh, that does look better," the woman said. "How clever."

"Minny," Cara said tentatively, and the woman glanced up at her, a little sharply, perhaps because of Cara's tone and what might follow.

"What, m'love?"

"Oh… nothing. I'm just fanciful!"

"It's this place," Minny said warmly. "Mordarras is like a little dream in the cold of the world. And there's nothing wrong in being like a child again, full of wonder."

"You're lucky to live here."

"Well, perhaps, but surely others choose to live where they do?"

Cara was silenced by these words, thinking about them.

Minny said, "Well, must get on. Judy won't be here for lunch, but I'll lay something out for you. Eat when you're ready."

"Yes. Thanks."

§

Cara didn't feel like eating lunch. She worked on, part of her wanting to proceed swiftly, while another part—perhaps the child

Minny had spoken of—wanted to delay, to prolong the work. Yet *Marvels of the Deeps* was a remarkably cooperative patient. The protective sheets slid onto the pages, hardly needed moving or shaping, never wrinkled, but adhered perfectly.

Does it want me gone? Cara thought.

The pictures had continued to guide Cara around the city, down into phosphorescent grottoes, up into forests of weeds. She met astounding sea creatures—immense squids who were ancient and wise, barely moving; fluttering veils of fishes who danced before her in fractal patterns; grouchy old crustaceans weighed down with dependent limpets. She stepped through a crowd of haloed anemones, which opened and closed as she passed. She came to a fan of coral in a shrine that glowed with its own eerie light. All of this within the half ruined arches and colonnades of the wondrous city. No people, though. The sea creatures didn't count. Cara was sure there were people, but they were hiding. The pictures were leading her away from the central temple but she wanted to return. Surely the book couldn't just finish without revealing its greatest secret? She wanted to skip to the end, but she couldn't. She was held back, forced to reveal each new picture only as she worked on its page.

§

By late afternoon, Cara was exhausted and very hungry. Judy came to find her. "You didn't eat your lunch," she said accusingly.

"Sorry, engrossed," Cara said, "but I'm starving now."

"Is it nearly done?"

"A lot of it's done, yes."

"Well, dinner's nearly ready."

Judy walked away and Cara followed. She paused in the hallway to stare at the stained glass window. That too could be a picture from *Marvels*. The mermaids were absent from their city because they were up in the storms of the world, assaulting sailing ships, seeking husbands to drown. She climbed the stairs to stand directly beneath the window. How strange. She hadn't noticed

before but the creatures reaching up to the terrified sailors weren't mermaids at all—they were male. These creatures were lithe and strong, with wet shawls of hair clinging to their pale flesh. Their faces were like Minny's, somewhat fishlike but still beautiful. The ship had rolled on its side and soon the sailors would drown. Irresistible arms would drag them down into the merciless waves, but not in desire. Cara could see now that in the distance, beyond the struggling ship, were the lights of home—the coast, the village, so near. And the women were watching there, in a row at the seashore, drenched by rain, their hair hanging down like weed.

No. There were no such details, just murky colors and suggestion.

Cara shivered and ran back down the stairs to the warmth of the dining room and another appetizing dinner.

§

She was working again. She could lift the tissues with one hand and let them float down on the page waiting to be preserved. No other action was required. Simply the heat of her hand against the fibers caused them to meld. The tissues sank into the pages, became invisible.

Her steps led her back to the heart of the city. As the pages turned, so did the pathways. Now the temple was ahead of her again, its summit haloed in a pulsing glow. She saw presently that an immense jellyfish enclosed it, tentacles hanging down, dotted with pinpricks of radiance like fairy lights.

She became aware of movement in the doorway to the temple, which must be the rear entrance, since she'd not yet returned to the front. At ground level, something seethed. As she drew nearer, she saw these were small creatures, which were half swimming, half crawling—very swiftly. Soon they were swarming round her feet, almost tripping her up. What *were* they? Some eight inches long, slim like fishes, yet with rudimentary limbs. They had gills, small round heads. They were fry—more developed than tadpoles—making for land. Although still drawn to the temple, she had to

follow these little creatures. She had to find out where they were going and why. There were so many of them. All along the ocean floor they scrabbled and flapped, and then the safe walls of the city were behind them and the terrible dark and cold of the open sea surrounded them. The fry were bigger now, yet still defenseless. Lithe forms undulated in to take bites of the vulnerable swarm, fishes with cruel teeth. Still the survivors struggled on. When finally they reached the surface, crawling on to the land, dawn had come. And then the vicious seabirds came down to take their fill. Now, thin shrieks filled Cara's ears, as the fry were snatched and taken. Grimly, those who escaped beaks and talons hurtled on. The women of Mordarras were waiting for them beyond the tide, calling, leaning down to pat their bent knees, encouraging, *begging*.

By the time the little creatures had reached the dry sand, they were running on two legs, upright, their plump white arms held out to the women. Little girls. A dozen little girls. Thousands more dead behind them.

Running with them, Cara could see that the women were sobbing, yet still encouraging and calling. For their daughters. Birds still tried to take the children, but Cara beat at them with wild arms, screamed in anger. The moment came when the girls were within reach of the women, who grabbed at them desperately. There were trills of joy and relief. Far more than a dozen women, though. But who could tell which child belonged to whom? All the women looked the same, as did the girls.

The greedy sea birds circled and screamed, but they'd taken all they were allowed. The rite of passage was done. The daughters had come home to their mothers.

§

Cara woke and sat upright in bed, panting. Her hair was wet with sweat, as was her skin and the bedclothes around her. She clawed herself into her dressing-gown and on bare feet ran downstairs. The stained-glass window in the hall glowed softly, lit by the moon, perhaps. Cara went to the library, turned on the desk light. She

turned the last few pages of the book hurriedly—they were *all* laminated. But she'd been in bed, hadn't she? Had she finished this work in her sleep, then somnambulantly returned to her room? There were the pictures of the daughters of Mordarras making their arduous journey from the city beneath the sea to land. One crucial aspect of the story didn't appear in the book. How did the process actually work? Did the mermen come to land to mate with the women, then take the spawn back with them? Or did the women take on fish tails and dive beneath the waves to join their husbands for the marriage rites? But when the spawn hatched no fathers appeared to protect them during that horrifying journey through the predators. Of course, if every child survived there would be far too many of them. How cruel, though, how barbaric. Yet, little different from the way baby turtles started life, Cara thought. Just the cruel barbarism of Nature herself. The strongest survived—or the luckiest.

From what Cara could discern from the last few pictures, the girls grew quickly. Four seasons were shown to pass, so that within only a year or so, the girls were women—or looked like women. Some returned to the sea, and their sisters waved to them from the shoreline. Some, Cara thought, must always stay on the land to maintain the ancient ways. And then a season would come when the lady of the house on the cliff would open the book and speak the words that would make things happen all over again.

Cara glanced up at the stained-glass window and it seemed to her that the abstract pattern within it was moving, the colors swirling to create something tangible. She could see an immense creature, somehow not understandable to her mind even though she could discern its details: a suggestion of the arms of an octopus, myriad arms, a great goatlike eye, a maw of anemone tendrils. Silhouettes clustered about it, men who were not entirely men and not entirely fish. Their arms were held up as if in supplication or worship. And then the colors ran down, as if they were a child's paints doused with water, and the picture swirled into abstract patterns once more.

Cara felt—*knew* now—that the De La Meres had brought back rather more than material treasures from their travels.

Dazed, holding her breath, and in fact finding it hard to breathe, Cara turned to the very last page of *Marvels of the Deeps*. All that was on it were seven sentences, composed like a poem, but of words she could neither understand nor pronounce.

§

At breakfast the next day, Cara said to Judy. "The book is finished. Will you tell your grandmother?"

Judy raised her eyes from the magazine she was perusing. "OK."

"I'm going into the village this morning. I'll leave tomorrow, if that's all right."

"Sure, don't start your drive today. The weather's bad again."

A rare moment of warmth from Judy, Cara thought, most likely because soon she would be gone.

§

Cara drove down to Mordarras and parked on the sea front. Through the rain, she could see children splashing around the rock pools as their mothers collected shellfish. She wasn't surprised. In the post office, she asked for tea and sat at one of the tables. The excited shouts of the children came to her ears as she sat waiting for her order.

When Sissy arrived with a tray, Cara said, "It happened last night, didn't it?"

Sissy stared at her. "What, m'love?"

"The children came."

Before she could say anything further, Sissy said, "It's half term, m'love," and moved away quickly to the back room of her shop.

Cara sipped her tea. *Outsider*. They'd never confide in her, include her.

Sissy did not reappear, so Cara left some money on the table and went outside. The rain had thinned to a hardly more than a mist. She considered going down to the beach but then decided

against it. They might not all be girls. They might be different ages and not all look the same.

Cara trudged back to her car and returned to Maples.

Once there, she searched for Minny but the woman wasn't to be found. Neither was Judy. She presumed Mrs. De La Mere was in her private rooms and knew she couldn't intrude there. The house felt empty and cold. Cara went to the library and examined her work. *No, this can't be real. It's a story book, a fairy tale. A story you might want to be real.*

For the rest of the day Cara looked through the books in the library. Many were extremely old and valuable, but there were no more mysterious tomes to further her knowledge of what lay within the pages of *Marvels of the Deeps*. Occasionally, she went back to look at the pictures. There was an ache in her belly, for tomorrow she would leave Maples and no one would stop her or ask her to stay. She'd done what she'd been hired to do.

At dinner, Mrs. De La Mere complained of tiredness, and did indeed appear frail and exhausted. Perhaps she'd had a busy night. "I can't stay up long, my dear," she said. "But thank you so much for all you've done. And so quickly too! You've earned a bonus for that."

"Really, there's no need…" Cara began feebly.

"Nonsense," interrupted Mrs. De La Mere. She paused. "And it's quite safe now for the children to look at the book?"

"Well, perhaps you could turn the pages for them, but use gloves, Mrs. De La Mere, *please*. I wouldn't let many people handle the book again."

"Well, that's better than nothing, I suppose."

Cara fixed Mrs. De La Mere with a stare and the woman returned it blandly. "It's quite a story," Cara said.

"It's a wonderful story," said Mrs. De La Mere.

§

When she went to her bedroom, Cara was in no mood for sleep. She sat by the window, gazing out at the restless sea. There was nothing

untoward to witness. Idly, she ran her hands over the radiator beneath the window. Then she began to tap. Various patterns and rhythms. *Please answer me… I will come to you. I will…*

Nothing.

She had to look at the book one last time, so went back downstairs. The house was silent and still. All she could hear was a clock ticking.

In the library, she found the book had gone. Mrs. De La Mere must have put it away somewhere, denying her that last glimpse of a hidden world. Cara stared up at the stained-glass window, tried to interpret its random pattern, force an image to form. No picture within the swirls would show itself to her, but even so, she wanted to believe it was there, for those who had eyes to see.

Mnemeros

R.A. Kaelin

Rural Texas is just rotten with ghost towns. I'm tempted to say that the past dies hard, but the truth is that it's more forgotten than anything else. Folks just have more to think about than the ramshackle farmhouses in their pastures.

Now, seeing as it was a two-hour drive to town, entertainment had to be found and it had to be made. That's why I started thrusting open the doors to dilapidated shacks, armed only with a few vague stories from octogenarians and a pocketknife. If I was lucky, I'd come back home with some kind of treasure—a chipped knick-knack, a bent branding iron from some long-dead ranch, severe brown medicine bottles stuffed with earth. We'd clean them up and stack them on top of the fridge. Humor me; there was no such thing as the Internet back then, and only two television channels to boot.

I used to get some real quality leads out of an old River Rat, a friend of my father's, who had zero qualms about closet skeletons.

"Wanna see something crazy? Then go down to the river," he told me. "There are carved stones down there that've been around since before the Comanches."

"Where at?" I asked.

"Not too far from your place. You take the farmer's road down past the Ross's pasture, the road by the old church, right? When you get down the cliffs, just go upriver. You'll find them. But I gotta warn you. You don't touch those stones, and you don't touch the tar coming out of them. Some kinda poison. And then there's the River Things. They'll drag you underwater if they can catch you."

The hair stood up on the back of my neck. Usually, nobody ever talked about the River Things; they only talked around them. You didn't go down to the river after dark. You didn't go to certain parts of the river without your gun—and other parts you didn't visit at all.

Official reasons were quicksand, rattlesnakes, rabid wildlife, and, sometimes, a long, pointed silence. If you were a kid or an outsider, you had to learn for yourself: there was no mountain lion half as bad as what lingered in that silence.

The River Rat kept talking. "Back in 1876, when old Rath built his saloon, he used the stones off the river. Made the Comanches furious—they attacked 'im for it, and we sent an expedition as far as Lubbock to teach them a lesson. Never could catch them, though. At the time, Rath City folks thought it was some religious tomfoolery. It wasn't; turns out those Comanches were wise to something we didn't know. Whole town of Rath City disappeared in a night. Gramps said you could hear screaming down on the Brazos for weeks."

By "whole town," he meant a population of about two hundred or so. We can't keep them much bigger down here.

"Then they took all the stones back, one by one," he said. "And it was like Rath City never was."

"And by 'they,' you mean the River Things, right?" I asked.

"Yep!" he said. Before I could ask him anything else, he turned on the TV and shooed me off.

If you don't think I planned to go down to the river that very Saturday, you don't know me at all.

§

No one blinked twice when I said that I was taking the scenic route around the Brazos. I braided my hair and packed the saddlebags with a simple lunch as usual. However, when it came time to saddle the horse, I nabbed Pistol, Mom's blocky bay. He was a racetrack reject who could cut cattle as quick as a wink. And although I've always been a believer in leaving a creature alone if it's minding its own business, I brought my brother's .22 and a box of shells along. If Mom had been paying more attention, she might've asked me what the hell I was doing.

I rode down the dirt road to the river, which snakes across the landscape like a groping alien limb. I still remember how fresh the

day was—one of those clear, cool days in the late spring, just before the summer sun baked the soil into crackled plates. We'd had buckets of rain and hail and a couple of tornado watches just the day before, and the road was rutted with murky puddles. The distant skies were still bruised black-blue and forked with lightning. As for me, I was lost in my own thoughts: meditating on the squeak of the saddle, the healthy scent of the horse, and the slop of mud beneath his hooves.

Before long, Pistol and I drew up to a rusty gate leading into the overgrowth that clusters 'round the Brazos. I had just dismounted to unlatch the chain when I heard an engine rumbling down the road behind us. I couldn't get over into the ditch because it was steep and slick and full of water, so I leaned over to see which farmer it was. I figured they'd probably stop to say hello.

I had to blink hard and squint. Churning torturously between the ruts was a gleaming black Fairlane spattered liberally with mud. I pulled Pistol over to the far left so the stranger wouldn't have to pass us, but to my displeasure, the car dragged to a stop beside us and the window rattled down.

A little old man sat in the front seat with the kind of face I'd only seen in Sunday afternoon movies. He had a neatly groomed mustache and goatee, wore round gold-rimmed spectacles and a threadbare tweed suit, and carried an old-fashioned briefcase stuffed full to bursting. His eight-track tape player was going full tilt—Strauss, "On the Beautiful Blue Danube," same recording as the one on a record back home. He struck me as one displaced in time, from his shining Oxfords to his spotless pair of driving gloves. I had the thought that if I touched him, he might dissipate like a soap bubble.

"Excuse me," he said. "Is this the way to the Brazos River?"

"It is," I said. "But you have to go through Ms. Ross's and Mr. Greentree's pastures. You get permission?"

"Oh, of course!" he said, and patted a couple of signed papers sitting beside him. "By the way, I don't believe I've introduced myself. I'm Dr. Arnold Peaslee from Miskatonic University in Massachusetts."

Massachusetts! A far-off salmon-colored state I'd only seen in

Social Studies. Suddenly I had a place to put with his accent.

He extended his hand, and we shook.

"My name is Leah Byrd," I said, squaring my shoulders. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm on the trail of some fascinating local folklore," he said. "Have you, by any chance… ah… seen any remarkable stones down on the river bank?"

I bit my bottom lip and glanced back at Pistol, who was eyeballing the Fairlane.

"Stones like these," he said, and rustled around in his briefcase.

He pulled out a series of fuzzy photocopies: stones of every size and shape and persuasion. Stones jutting above the waterline, stones eclipsed by thorny bushes, stones that still stood in some semblance of walls. Some of them were big enough to build a house with; others, no bigger than your fist. Many bulged and bubbled in organic shapes, while others were graced with bas reliefs. Tarry seepage trickled from broken corners.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm… I know about them."

"My specialty is archaeology," he said. "And of course, I dabble in folklore and myth on the side." When he saw my expression, he smiled. "If you're worried, I assure you that I won't disturb the location."

"You couldn't touch them if you wanted to," I said. "It's been raining hard and the river's overflowed its banks. We may not see anything at all."

A flash of panic crossed his face, and he sagged through the window. If I had been wise, I would have jumped up on Pistol and spurred him the whole way home—it would've saved me a lot of trouble in the long run. Instead, I hesitated. I can't help liking earnest people. It's a curse.

"Ms. Byrd, I beg of you. It's a cosmic stroke of fortune that I have discovered you at all," he said. "You know what I speak of and you know where to go. It seems you may even know the same stories. If you do, then you know what day this is, and why it is so important that I visit the stones at once."

"Are you sure you're dressed for it?" I asked. "There's gonna be

mud up to your ears."

"Yes, I'm prepared," he said.

"I'm saying this because the road ends in a bit and you'll have to walk the rest of the way. If I were riding China I'd say we could double up, but Pistol's a drama queen, and I don't want you falling off."

"I see," he said, and looked a bit relieved.

"Your car doesn't have four-wheel drive, either," I said.

"Ms. Ross said that I should be fine," he said.

I shrugged. "All right, if you want. But if you get stuck, you'll have to walk back to her house."

So he rumbled through the gate, and I shut the gate behind us. I swung my leg over Pistol's back, and together we descended into the knotted mesquite thickets.

Dr. Peaslee drove alongside me and Pistol down the road, car groaning over the ruts. The blessed silence and rain-perfumed air was gone, exchanged for the rumble of the engine and the stink of exhaust. Dr. Peaslee turned to smile at me every now and then. I smiled back, but I won't lie; I was a bit nervous. The River Rat gave me stories because he knew he could trust me, and it felt like betrayal to bring an outsider.

"Do you know anything about archaeology?" Dr. Peaslee asked.

"I like reading the *National Geographic*," I said. "And I've got some arrowheads in my jewelry box."

"How much do you know about the local area?" he asked. "Do you know anything about the end of Rath City?"

"A little, but it's a ways out south," I said. "It didn't last too long."

"Yes, only four years, from what I've heard," he said.

The hair stood up on my neck. It's one thing to discuss Rath City in a house, quite another when you're nearly at the Brazos itself.

His voice took on a slightly fretful tone. "It seems everyone has a different story to tell about it. Some say the Comanches had something to do with its end…"

"Sir, all due respect, but we shouldn't talk about it here," I said.

He nodded and withdrew, and there was silence for a while. We

weaved between the tortured trunks of the mesquites, last season's blackened beans swiveling in the wind. Branches squealed against the Fairlane's flanks, and the horse's ears rotated idly. The incline grew steeper, and the branches around us knotted tighter and grew higher—a jumbled mass of root and branch and thorn and leaf, stained dark from the recent rainfall. A bobwhite called from far away and went silent. I remember feeling oddly lonely.

Soon we sloshed up to a cul-de-sac dug out by decades of truck tires. The last gate hung there, paint peeling, its faded "No Trespassing" sign glaring wearily at us.

"You can't take the car any further," I said, jumping off the horse. Mud squelched beneath my boots. "Take what you need and I'll show you the rocks."

Just as I pulled on Pistol's reins, the stupid horse laid his ears back and put on the brakes. I had to drag him all the way and knot his reins around my arm so I could undo the latch.

"Is there something wrong with your horse?" Dr. Peaslee asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I don't think he likes your car."

"But I turned it off," he said.

"Pistol is a special case," I said. "I probably shouldn't have ridden him today, honestly."

Dr. Peaslee opened his door and perched on the edge of his seat, staring down into the mud. Very methodically, he unlaced his patent-leather dress shoes, so glossy I could see my reflection in them, and donned a pair of neat old hiking boots. I almost laughed—each boot was big enough for him to put both feet in. With that, he withdrew a camera case and a satchel bulging with god-knew-what.

I eyed the doctor's shoes. "Are you sure you don't need to go back for galoshes?"

"I'm perfectly sure," Dr. Peaslee said, lifting his chin, and stepped off into the mud up to his shins. He paled a little. Cold water in his shoes, I guess. I knew right then that I was probably going to bring him home so he could shower.

As for me, I was a little nervous about getting on Pistol again. He had progressed from mild distaste to insistent refusal: he strained away from me, lips pulled back from his thick, flat teeth. A

chill ran down my neck; the silence seemed heavy and oppressive, and in the distance, the thunder was oddly muted. Don't know why I didn't stop right then; I guess Dr. Peaslee's presence kept me going.

While Dr. Peaslee picked his way around the edge of the cul-de-sac, where the mesquites and weeds clumped the earth together, I dug my pocketknife and spurs out of the saddlebag. I tucked the knife into my pocket and I donned the spurs—usually unnecessary on Pistol, who would take off at the least insistence—and finally managed to remount. When we passed through this gate, I didn't close it. This is the height of bad manners since it might free livestock, and it was the first time I hadn't done so since I was a little girl.

I urged Pistol out through the gate and into the pasture beyond. The doctor lurched alongside us, picking his way along the side of the road. Finally, we broke out of the undergrowth and slopped to the edge of a cliff. Below, the Brazos had clawed a ragged red canyon into the earth. The old river was swollen, churned up into a dirty gray color, choppy with a rough current. Dr. Peaslee withdrew a camera with a lens jutting out of it as big as a pepper-grinder and snapped a few shots of the landscape. The snapping and clicking sounds were unpleasantly loud.

I pointed upriver. "The stones are that way," I said. "Are you sure you want to head out? It might be flooded."

I gotta admit, by this point, I wasn't thinking about betraying the River Rat. I was thinking how weirdly silent it was out there. Usually, all the little frogs come out after a storm, but they were quiet as the grave.

"That's all right," he said. "I've come this far."

"All right," I said. "Watch your step. And don't follow Pistol too closely. He might kick."

We padded carefully down a steep incline toward the canyon floor. I kept an eye on the doctor as he stumbled behind us. He was covered in mud: mud up to his knees and mud all over his hands and sleeves, and a streak of mud on his forehead from where he had wiped away sweat. I was a little worried about him. He was a desk-job type, and I doubted he did much more than toddle to the

mailbox every day.

The incline flattened out at last and we were safe on the level valley floor. It was easier going down on the winding hog paths between the mesquites and cactus; the roots kept the soil firmer there. We passed some hog wallows circled by prints—cattle, deer, hogs, coyotes—wild things all sleeping somewhere in the dripping foliage. As we passed further into the brush, I started smelling a sticky musk, something reminiscent of the stink of a skunk and a garter snake put together.

Dr. Peaslee covered his nose with a handkerchief. "What is that?"

"I don't know," I said.

All of a sudden, Pistol spooked something awful, dancing sideways as though he'd seen a rattlesnake. I scanned the underbrush and saw nothing, and that just scared me more. You don't understand, coming from the suburbs, how easily a wild thing can just disappear into the underbrush. All it has to do is stand still, and nine times out of ten, you can stare directly at it and see nothing.

Then we rounded a thick stand of mesquites and saw the hog traps.

The hog traps were built out of obsolete cotton-bale trailers with makeshift one-way doors welded on. Everyone in the area used them; feral hogs could obliterate whole fields in a night, and they were a ready supply of pork, so they were free game. What we'd do is pour feed corn inside and prop the makeshift door open with a stick. The hogs would funnel in, knocking out the stick in their eagerness, and bang! The door would drop and the pigs were stuck. Next morning everyone would come out with their guns of choice, climb to the top of the trailers, and take aim. We'd eat hog for weeks.

Normally, when the trapped hogs hear humans coming, they'll start charging from one side of the trailer to the other, and can be heard tramping and squealing and banging into the walls. Today, I heard nothing. Pistol's ears were flat, his eyes rolled back, his chin thrust skyward. He danced in that unpleasant half-hopping way that preceded a bucking fit.

There must've been hogs in the trap at some point. I say that

because there was blood and hide everywhere. Fresh yellow bones striped with raw flesh lay jumbled in roughly sorted piles—ribs with ribs, vertebrae with vertebrae, femurs with femurs. Droplets glistened redly on the steel mesh, and the mud was churned up until it had the consistency of a milkshake. Here and there was an almost intact head with the eyes, tongue, and ears cored out. The mud was scored with tracks—not the tracks of the hogs, nor boot prints, but whip-like arcs like those made by serpents. I couldn't get Pistol much closer and frankly, I didn't want to.

"Shit," I said.

Quivering, Dr. Peaslee sloshed over and lifted his camera.

"Gross!" I said. "What are you taking pictures of them for?"

"Surely you know what day it is!" he said.

"April 15?"

He leaned down to take a close-up. "You mean you don't know what this means?"

"That we should leave?"

Dr. Peaslee laughed up at me. His teeth were very white. "Oh, no!" he said. "It means that the stars are favorable, and they're here."

I turned white as a sheet. Wrong action. His face lit up and he clapped the camera to his chest.

"Then you know! Where? Where are they?"

Shit!

"I don't know. Holes in the cliffs, below the waterline. They stick around the stones, generally." My tongue felt stiff. "But if what you're saying is right, if you're trying to tell me they killed these hogs, then we shouldn't go anywhere near the rocks."

His eyes settled on the .22 hanging on Pistol's hip. "But you are armed."

I shook my head. "No, no, no. You've been watching too many cowboy flicks, man. I'm not looking for trouble here. Self-defense only."

He relaxed. "You're right. They might turn violent at the sight of weaponry."

"'Might'? What stories have you heard where they brought us bouquets and chocolates?"

"Communication of the proper kind might solve everything," he said. "That's why I have taken the time to learn their tongue. There are books…" He licked his lips. "Very old books transcribing the language and the methods necessary to its mastery."

My jaw dropped. He might as well have grown an extra arm right in front of me.

"Why would you do that?" I asked. "The Things'll kill you before they stop for a chat. Didn't you see those hog bones back there? Hogs are not easy to kill, and they fight back. What do you think the Things will do to you?"

He stretched himself up to his full height and lifted his chin.

"My dear, I must try," he said. "For you must understand that if I can speak to these creatures, it will advance our comprehension of both human civilization and the universe. Besides, I am quite old, and have lived a full life; if I died like this, seeking the knowledge of centuries past, it would be a fitting end indeed."

My god. Yanks have got only sentimentality where their brains should be. It's because they watch so many movies.

"Okay," I said, "but if we need to run, you're out of luck. I don't think I can keep Pistol in line long enough for you to jump on."

"I am prepared for that!" he said, touching his heart. "Please, Ms. Byrd. Let's go on."

My brain was awhirl with possibilities; the possibilities of seeing the stones and the creatures versus the possibility of real trouble, perhaps death. When I didn't reply quickly enough, Dr. Peaslee trotted up to us. Pistol backed away stiffly. Not that Pistol was a judge of character; at that point a branch in the wind would have set him off. I was trying to calm him down when Dr. Peasley pulled out his wallet and started peeling out tens and twenties.

"Doctor, no," I said. "I don't want your…"

He grabbed my hand and stuck a whole wad of cash in it, and when Pistol jerked away he doggedly doddered after us and stuffed some bills in my boot. I think he would have dumped his change in there if he felt it could have swayed me. God! I felt absurd, clenching that money in my hand, money balled up on my shin. For some reason, god only knows—I nodded and stuck it in my pocket. It

burned against my hip.

I twisted Pistol 'round and jabbed him with my spurs. He took off at a fast trot with flattened ears and bulging eyeballs. Without a word, we ducked down the labyrinth of hog and cattle paths toward the river itself. I didn't look to see if the doctor was following, but every now and then I heard the click and whirr of his camera. I propped my .22 on my knee, popped the safety off, and kept my eyes peeled on the brush.

We were hemmed in by a jumble of thorny branches that dropped our visibility to two or three feet at best. Every corner was a blind one, and often paths split into three or four branches that led off into winding ways unknown. The landscape was full of watchful eyes we could not see; I could feel them boring into us. I looked for shapes and shadows in the brush and strained for the sound of snapping branches, rustling leaves. Over time, the strange stink grew so powerful I could taste it. I hoped the hogs had been killed sometime in the night, when the River Things are most likely to come out of the water, and prayed that the sunlight would keep them underground.

I should've known from the dampness of the blood that they hadn't been gone too long.

"So… you know about them?" Dr. Peaslee asked. "The amphibious people of the Brazos?"

"I don't know if I would call them 'people,'" I said.

"Well—I suppose you're right in the technical sense."

He was smiling about something at my expense, and I can't say I liked it much. So I didn't say anything.

He cleared his throat. "But you've seen them."

"No," I said. "All I know is that they move the stones around."

"And do you know why?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Have you heard of Mnemeros, by any chance?" he asked.

That name! It was the first time I'd heard it and I didn't ever want to hear it again. Some names are like keys; they swing doors wide open that are best left shut.

"It's all right if you haven't," he said. "He's a beautifully kept

secret, preserved for only the select few. An ancient god, you see, from the faraway stars."

Prickles ran down my spine. "You'd better not be a Satanist."

"Oh, no! Absolutely not." His smile was expansive and bright. "There's nothing to be afraid of, I assure you. I refer to him as a 'god' only to refer to his power and scope compared to ours. Here, let me explain… ah… you are a Bible-fearing type, aren't you?"

I nodded—easier than telling the truth.

"Then you're aware of 'principalities and powers,' 'princes of the air'?"

"You mean demons?" I asked.

"No, I mean things outside of your god."

"Yeah, demons." I was a big book reader even then, big on apologetics in particular. No way was some lukewarm scholar going to trip me up with something as silly as semantics.

"Well, dear, imagine, if you will, these demons. Not little demons, no, but rather, awesome interdimensional lords with shapes and voices that would blast a man sightless and raving, if the experience didn't kill him outright. Creatures on par with Beelzebub and Apollyon and Azrael."

"Still demons," I said.

"But demons exist, do they not?" asked Dr. Peaslee, and lifted his chin.

I went silent. I couldn't bring myself to say *yes*.

"Would you care to hear a story?" asked Dr. Peaslee. "A story about the Great Old Ones, who flung themselves down to Earth when the stars were right?"

It took me too long to process the sentence. My loss. He kept talking.

"Many millions of years ago, the Great Old Ones descended to our world in a curtain of fire and built their holy city," he said. "R'lyeh, a city of extraterrestrial stone and alien geometry, peopled with beings of unspeakable shape and size. For many millions of years they ruled there, lords of the Earth… until the stars were closed to them and they fell into a vast darkness like death."

His voice quavered, but there was a richness in it, the kind of

timbre born of passion. You know that dramatic way that a writer recites what they've written? I could tell he'd written about this, over and over and over again in a million different ways, and said it to himself like a mantra.

"But one of their brothers was late," he said. "Whether it was from arrogance or misreading the signs, no one can say. Sixty-five million years ago, he hurtled from the sky, and because he did not arrive when the path was open, he burned the whole way down."

"Lucifer," I said. My words fell flat.

But Dr. Peaslee's eyes were closed, and he did not appear to hear me.

"His smoldering remnant crawled with torturous slowness from the crater he had made, the god of a thousand faces and ten thousand hands. But the stars had not forgotten his insult; they say he burns still, and writhes as he burns. He calls and calls, casting his dreams out to his kin in R'lyeh and to the nameless, formless ones past the veil, but he is corrupted. They will not answer."

His eyes opened. There was a light there that I did not entirely like.

"But there is a boon in this for mortal man," said Dr. Peaslee. "For in becoming corrupted, Mnemeros became more like us. He can speak to us and we will not die. And what fortune! He contains more in one thimbleful of knowledge than twenty Libraries of Alexandria. Knowledge of hundreds of different cultures and times and locales, an intimate understanding of the natural world and realms unspeakable, all gleaned with his roving, dreaming mind. This, my dear, is as close to God as one can get!"

"So you're going to ask him questions?" I said. "For what?"

"The expansion of history and the sciences," he said, "for which mankind must only pay a small price, compared to what others might offer. You see, he is broken, almost past salvation; he was incinerated and shredded on his long fall, and was scattered all over the Earth. Some of his detached organs have grown conscious to help him, but they require constant access to water. That is where we come in: to find those pieces, and to find parts that can replace what he has lost, and finally, to provide the labor necessary to put him

together again. His reward to us is knowledge unsurpassed."

"Oh my god," I said. "You mean you're going to put a demon back together? What if he goes on a rampage or something?"

"This is not Godzilla," said Dr. Peasley sharply. He paused and appraised me, as though looking at me for the first time. "Well, if he grows capable of it, he might move to more populated areas to harvest the organics he requires, but that requires the opening of the second gate—that is to say, the proper alignment of certain constellations. Besides, his ultimate goal lies elsewhere. He believes that, should he be returned to his glory, he will be accepted back into R'lyeh. I, on the other hand, have reason to believe he would be cast screaming into the abyss. Which means that we have a limited time if we wish to consult him before he is remade and crawls to his doom."

Now, if I had still been devout, I might've said Dr. Peaslee was a devil-worshipper and ridden off fast. But I had been harboring some doubts lately—like I said, I was into apologetics—so all I said was, "Who's crazy enough to believe all that?"

Dr. Peaslee raised his hand and ripped his glove off. Pistol and I recoiled. At a first glance, it looked like Dr. Peaslee was wearing another glove. But he wasn't; his hand was as wet as if he had dipped it in tar.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," said Dr. Peaslee gently. "I know that for the uninitiated, it must seem terrible. And I will not lie: it does burn so! But it is a mark that I will be one of those to whom great things are revealed."

Now, I've always been poor as a church mouse, doubly so when I was a child, but it was without hesitation that I pulled the cash out of my pocket and threw it. I threw it fucking everywhere. I turned my boot over and dumped Benjamins in the mud. I noted in an offhand way that the bills were all that darker, more florid green of an older design—like Dr. Peaslee had been storing them under his bed for two decades. But Dr. Peaslee didn't jump for the cash. He simply stared at me with that gentle old-man's smile.

I urged Pistol away from him and we sidled down the hog path. Dr. Peaslee followed behind, tucking his hand back into his glove.

"Please don't be afraid, Ms. Byrd," he said.

I didn't say anything. I was all choked up. Pistol was frantic and growing more so by the minute, but I didn't dare let him go. I knew he'd take off, and I wasn't sure I could control him. Dr. Peaslee walked after us—or did he herd us? It was hard to say. Suddenly I couldn't think of the way back; as though by default, Pistol and I kept just ahead of Dr. Peaslee, taking the turns one by one. Perhaps we thought, in that simple bestial logic that panic grants us, that if we gave him what he wanted, he would leave us alone.

The roar of the river grew louder and louder. Soon we started seeing the stones. Once, perhaps, they had been stacked and sorted; now they tumbled in wild disarray, and the hog paths wandered all around them. The photocopies hadn't done them any justice—the sheer number, I mean. Stones, stones, stones, as far as the eye could see, of every composition you could imagine, and carved in a multitude of shapes and for a multitude of purposes. Here and there they bled black soup into the undergrowth.

Dr. Peaslee stopped several times to take notes and pictures. I didn't stop for him; Pistol and I jigged onward like a pair of idiots. It occurred to me that the doctor seemed rather quick for an old man. Whenever I looked over my shoulder, he was always standing somewhere behind us. I started harboring this fancy that he would appear suddenly in front of us and touch us with that horrible black hand of his.

Finally, we broke through a heap of cactus and caught sight of the river. Normally the bank was visible, a pale sandy quagmire, but the waves had washed over their boundaries and foamed among the cottonwoods and mesquites. A combination of rain and current had crumbled part of the cliff, revealing a gaping cave mouth.

Dr. Peaslee scurried past me, camera clutched in his hands.

"Hey!" I said. "Don't!"

For a second, both Pistol and I were frozen still. As for Dr. Peaslee, he stood at the edge of the river. I could see the gears turning in his brain. The only way up to the cave entrance was a ramp of jumbled stones, and its base had long been swallowed up by the river. No telling how deep the water was there. Every now and

then I saw a dark shape bob by, usually a drenched branch or the rolling, bloated body of an animal.

"You're going to drown!" I shouted.

He dropped his satchel beside him and opened it. Oh my god! Black syrupy stuff spidered out, stretching for the ground and groping at the air. Without hesitation, he jammed both of his hands in it until it poured out in thick goopy rolls. He lifted out a stone as big as a Thanksgiving turkey. It bled tar everywhere, and where the black syrup touched his clothes, blue flames licked up. Straightening up, Dr. Peaslee heaved the stone over his head and sang out in a weird ululating tongue.

Far off, I heard a big splash. Then another. It was the same sound I associated with a frog jumping into the water, except magnified. Whatever had fallen into the river must've been at least the size of a mid-sized dog. Immediately, Pistol jolted with terror and swung around. Thrusting my .22 back into its holster, I jerked on the reins. Soon we were spinning in circles, he straining to race back the way we came, I trying to restrain him.

I saw the scene in flashes with each rotation: Dr. Peaslee lowering the stone. Dr. Peaslee turning to regard us with knotted brows. Then, behind him, a long, sinuous arm lifting, dripping, from the water.

"Dr. Peaslee!" I shouted. "Watch out!"

Black, shining cords lashed around Dr. Peaslee's throat and legs and arms and yanked him backward. He didn't even have the chance to cry out. Down he went without a sound into the brown foam of the Brazos, stone and all.

With a choking cry, I let go, and Pistol bolted.

Pistol's ears flattened against his skull, his neck stretched out, his hooves pounded against the hog paths. Low-hanging branches lashed us. Mesquite thorns scored us. The stacked stones stared as we galloped by. I strained to hear beyond my own heartbeat, but all that followed us was the roar of the river and the intermittent grumble of thunder.

When we burst through the brush into the clearing where the River Rats kept their hog traps, I heard it: a rattling, clattering sound,

one I had long associated with a hog's headlong flight. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw the mesquites shuddering from a pack of unseen pursuers. The wind breathed an overpowering, musky stink into my face.

The steep incline rose above us, scarred by a single narrow path. Pistol took it without hesitation. Now, if it had been dry, this wouldn't have been a problem, but down near the Brazos, the earth is a slimy red clay. Every second step was a slip or a stumble. When we were halfway up, his hoof slid in the mud and he pitched forward and down onto one knee. For a breathless moment I hovered over a dizzying drop into a cactus patch. I clutched at the saddle horn, grabbed Pistol's mane, and clung for dear life as he struggled to his feet. I cast a frantic glance over my shoulder.

Plunging through the careless weed were sleek black shapes, glistening like frogs, slithering and crawling in turns, some as large as cattle. And then, to my horror, a monster hog crashed through the branches, utterly black with matted hair, its barrel body pulsing with sickening throbs. Before I could see the whole of him, Pistol took off again, thrusting with his powerful hind legs. His headlong sprint had slowed only a little; he was dark with sweat, and his breathing was rough and tattered.

As we flashed through the first gate, a sudden sickening thought occurred to me. The other gate was latched shut, and Pistol was no jumper. My guess was that he'd see the closed gate and veer alongside it into the underbrush, and if that happened, we'd be caught for sure. My mind spun, my heart sank. I'd have to stop a thousand pounds of panicked prima donna to open a gate, and there was a chance he'd take off without me if I timed it wrong.

I jerked Pistol to the side of the road, where the earth was more solid and the branches slashed us, and thanked god that the road was straightforward. Pistol slipped once or twice on the mud, but foot by blessed foot, he put the distance between us and our pursuers. When I saw the gate coming, I wrenched him back, using all of my weight.

Pistol strained against me the whole way. The more he fought, the more of a hold I took, until I thought his head would end up in

my lap. My arms burned; I gnawed a bloody wound in my cheeks. His nose slowly tilted toward the sun, and his spittle was pink with blood. A few yards from the fence line, his haunches finally dropped and he skidded to a stop. I dove off, praying he wouldn't run, and hobbled to the gate. I had clenched my legs against Pistol's sides so hard and for so long that they didn't want to bend.

My fingers slipped on the links. I didn't bother looking behind me, but I could hear it: the rattling, snapping sound of unseen Things breaking through the underbrush, and not far down the road, the rhythmic drumbeat of the monster hog's hooves. His silent pursuit unnerved me. Hogs are usually such vocal creatures.

I slung the gate open. Without closing it, I hopped into the saddle and kicked him so hard that he jumped. Off he sprang again, again at a full gallop. We broke out of the brush into flat, furrowed pastureland, where you can see twenty miles to the horizon on every side. Ahead of me, a mere six miles away, I could even see the abandoned church and someone's pickup zipping along the road. I could have cried. Instead, I dared to peek over my shoulder.

The brush shook and shuddered, but the movement stopped at the fence-line. I thought I saw the glint of feral eyes, wet, bulging bodies, and writhing limbs. Then a keening went up, a terrible screeching cry, and the monster hog shot out of the gate behind us.

God, he was huge! Freed from the blinding brush, he was much easier to see. I regretted looking at once. His sides heaved not with regular breaths, but with a weird undulating motion similar to the pulse of maggots in roadkill. His stride was almost mechanical, as though he had no joints. Sticky black strings and tendrils streamed out of his nostrils and between his blackened tusks, and every now and then I fancied that they moved of their own volition, like the searching heads of blind worms. The only points of color were his eyes: bloody, rheumy, and red.

As we fled from him, a cold wind enveloped us. A few heavy raindrops burst on my shoulders. I had neglected to watch the sky: the faraway storm had rolled toward us with unprecedented speed and we could hardly outrun it. Back in the brush, the keening transformed into a triumphant howl.

Abnormal twilight cloaked the landscape and the wedge of rainfall struck us. The keening sound fell away and was replaced by slapping, slipping sounds. In a lightning flash, I saw dozens of amorphous shadows tumbling toward us. Pistol stumbled and his breath hitched. I leaned over him, shielding my face with the hat, and peered off into the distance. I didn't dare look over my shoulder. All I could look forward to was breaking out of the rain or hitting the paved road. One way meant better vision and less pneumonia; the other meant that we could reach a neighbor's house in only ten minutes or so.

Thunder rumbled, lightning flashed, and a multi-legged shape slithered out of the ditch in front of us. I jerked the .22 out of its holster, whipped it to my shoulder. The thing zigzagged toward us, slinging its ropy arms out as though to drag us down. I pulled the trigger. The muzzle flashed, the shot cracked out.

Wop! Black blood spurted across the road. Screeching, the River Thing recoiled directly into our path. Pistol darted hard right when the gun went off, but I ripped him back to the road and gouged him with the spurs.

What I had hoped would happen: Pistol would run the Thing over like a car in an action movie.

What actually happened: Pistol stabbed his front hooves into the ground, his head went down, and he launched me right over his neck. There was a sickening lurch and I was weightless.

The next second, I kamikazed that River Thing so hard that the breath was knocked out of me. I wasn't sure if I saw lightning or stars. My .22 cartwheeled off somewhere into the dark. I wish I could say I was back up on my feet in a second, brandishing my pocketknife, but all I did was gasp and flop around in a puddle. Pistol galloped away, stirrups banging against his sides, and disappeared.

I rolled onto my knees. Through what may have been fortune, I had flipped over the River Thing and landed on the other side of it. It pushed itself up on its terrible long legs and panted, stinking, sloshing, ululating in a language I didn't understand. I couldn't see it well in the darkness; all I saw was a suggestion of countless arms,

dozens of blinking eyes in every size and shape and color.

It should've killed me. Instead, it hesitated, then threw its arms out. A stream of garbled English poured from its mouth. The voice… sounded familiar.

I thrust myself up to my feet and took off running.

My legs were stiff from the ride and even with my hat I could barely see anything ahead of me. It didn't matter; I put everything I had into that run. The roar of the rain, the slopping slushing sound of the pursuing River Things, the rapidly approaching hoofbeats and tortured breathing of the monster hog—all these things ran together until they were a terrifying singularity. For a while I had no past and I had no future; I was a runner, I had been born running, and there was no future that did not involve running.

I don't know how long I ran, only that I was winded, aching, and exhausted. The rain slackened a little, and a building coalesced out of the darkness. I couldn't see it well in the dark, which seemed strangely deep for the afternoon. How long had I been running? Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes?

I dashed across the paved road. Offhand, I noted that it seemed strangely worn down, weeds growing out of faults in the cement. Then I stumbled down into the ditch and over the barbed wire fence. Ms. Ross's husband had hung coyote carcasses on the fence posts, and the stink of their rot followed me all the way to the steps. It was only then that I recognized the building. Of course: the abandoned clapboard Baptist church, a single-room affair I'd visited once to look at the owl nest in the belfry. The windows had been boarded up decades before I had been born.

I stumbled up the steps, jiggled the knob. It gave. I thrust it open with my shoulder and slammed it shut behind me, then felt for the deadbolt and twisted it with all my strength. It should've been rusty; it should've been broken. But against all reason, the bolt slid and the door locked behind me.

I whirled around, waiting until my eyes grew accustomed to the dark. Outside, the sloshing sounds grew nearer and nearer. Whatever I did, I couldn't stand there. I shrank down against the floor, prayed the building wasn't full of snakes, and crept toward the

belfry.

Eventually my eyes adjusted. Pale light floated through the chinks between the boards. The pews were still lined up, heaped with refuse from the collapsing ceiling. A thick miasma of mouse urine and dust filled the air, and rodents skittered unseen in the rafters. All I could hear was the roar of the rain on the roof and the jingling of my spurs.

Then something wet slapped on the wall. Another joined it, and another, until uncountable creatures drummed together with uncoordinated limbs. The building groaned; a window cracked; dust hissed from the ceiling.

"Leave me alone!" I shouted.

But the drumming only intensified, and as did the unspeakable babbling. I clapped my hands over my ears and screamed back at them: swear words, Bible verses, a few lines from classics. Lightning burst nearby and illuminated the church in broken slashes. Printed painstakingly on the wall in magic marker were careful squares filled with hieroglyphs, written by an unknown hand. In the shifting blue light, each thick squiggle was a worm twitching. The more I looked at them, the hazier and uglier I felt. A weird effect passed over me: I could almost imagine a deep, chanting voice, in a guttural language unlike any from a human throat.…

I whirled and stumbled—fueled solely by terror, and not by conscious thought—up to the belfry. I registered the cold and wet only dimly, as though from a memory, and my movements grew sluggish and poorly defined. The world seemed unfocused and I had the odd sensation that my consciousness was off-kilter from my body. Worst of all, the chanting I thought I had imagined was growing louder, so deep that it vibrated through my body. I jumped when I heard the bell tolling—an awful, warped, discordant sound!

In that instant, I totally despaired. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. In the Pentecostal tradition, I should've been able to use the name of God like a hammer, but never before had he seemed so inadequate. I longed for the solid grip of my gun.

When I stepped up into the belfry, I crunched over the abandoned owl's nest and was stricken silent. An uncountable horde

of River Things swayed around the church, and just past them… Let's just say that the church as I had known it was out in the middle of nowhere, a broken edifice with boarded windows. Somehow, during my headlong flight up to the belfry, a small town had sprouted around us. I could just see the hints of right angles, the rooftops of amateur shanties, and the glitter of manmade lights. Shadows in the shapes of men wavered down unseen roads, hunched beneath invisible burdens.

When the lightning flickered again, I thought I saw the entire countryside overgrown with the specters of long-abandoned farmhouses and churches and post offices and grain silos and Comanche tipis, some juxtaposed over each other and semi-transparent, all crumbling and half-dead in the dark. It was as though I stood over some terrible vision of the past and the present and the future, all coinciding in the same space.

I rushed back down into the church. To my horror, I stepped into the dull yellow heat of some other time. The interior had been swept, the roof patched, the windows covered with tarps. The pews and pulpit had been stacked on top of one another and thrust to the walls. There in the center of the room, bulging grotesquely and stinking of rot, was a throbbing, humming mass of flesh. By its blackened head and miserable eyes, I recognized the monster hog, but something terrible had happened to its body.

God, the smell! Like burning hair and burning meat and burning plastic. The sound! A steady, omnipresent pounding, a series of singular words chanted below a level I could detect. As for what it looked like, I can't quite tell you. The texture was a confusing patchwork of prickly, smooth, hairy, and feathered, all tarred down. It was a bulbous shape, a fat swollen boil—a heart? A tumor? A fetus? If a fetus, it was doubled up within a thick translucent sac, many-limbed, many-faced, and sported a dozen oblong black shapes that suggested undeveloped eyes. If a tumor, it bubbled all over with irregular growths—cauliflower-like, fluid-filled bubbles heaping ten feet high. If a heart, it sprouted with rubbery arterial branches and pulsed in regular beats, roughly and with great struggle. The chanting I had heard seemed to originate from the torn arterial

mouths. As for the hog himself, he heaved with uneven breaths and uttered nothing.

Lying beside that heaving alien mass were carefully arranged organs and limbs and hides, laved in that peculiar tarlike substance I'd seen bleeding from the rocks near the river. Piles of the selfsame rocks had been heaped in that room as well, cracked open with hammers. Here and there a fleshy organic substance jutted out of a broken stone. Other samples of their kind were stitched together like living carpets, quivering in terrible synchronicity with the mass in the center of the room.

Squatting near the door was a group of River Things, sopping wet and singing. Some were stitching up the fleshy pieces with big bone needles and hemp rope, both they and the fleshy pieces twitching with every jab; others were bathing organs in black soup; still more were pouring buckets of water on their fellows in an assembly-line fashion. They throbbed in time with the beating tumor, thrown into shadow by its weird yellow glow.

The hog's mouth opened and exhaled; the three mouths hummed something low, too low for me to hear, and all of those River Things looked up and regarded me at the same time. You know how old medieval artists depict saints with haloes as a sign they've been touched by god? Well, that monster hog and those River Things had some kind of halo, something I couldn't see but could feel, like they had been touched by some baleful intelligence.

I flipped out my pocketknife and backed up the stairs. Ha! Like threatening a bull with your pinky finger!

The front door broke open and two River Things slithered into the building. They dragged with them the poor broken body of their brother, the one I had shot. When it saw me, it raised its pathetic arms to me, turned two strikingly human eyes to mine, and said in a strangled voice that I still recognized: "Ms. Byrd! Please don't be afraid."

The unspoken truce broke. River Things dropped their burdens and charged, and I spun on my heels and raced up into the belfry. Crunching through the owl's nest, I ducked through the open window and jumped out onto the roof, which had been hastily

patched with black garbage bags and rusty tin squares. I saw two things in a flash: first, that there was a truck roaring along the road, the phantom buildings rippling around it like mirages. Second, that dozens of River Things were sluicing out of the belfry like a swarm of octopi.

I sprinted across the roof, tiles splintering underneath my heels. Over my shoulder breathed an overpowering musk; the whole building shuddered beneath dozens of beating feet. My heel stabbed through the roof and I staggered. Wet, burning cords lashed around my wrist and calf, but I dragged my captors with me through sheer force. From behind me, another familiar voice called out.

"Wait! Wait! Come back!" it said.

Terror jagged through me. I didn't dare stop to think about it. Instead, propelled by sheer terror, I drove forward, over the church roof, and sprang free. For a second I hovered over a rolling black sea of arms and legs. The next, the cords snapped taut and I swung back toward the building. I smashed into the church wall. At the same time, the River Things fished for me with long, ropy arms, snagging me 'round my arms and legs and throat. I clawed madly for handholds under the eaves and jammed my boots into the overhang. It didn't matter. Inch by inch, they pried me out.

They had just managed to jerk my legs up onto the roof when someone leaned on their car horn.

I lifted my head. It was the truck I had seen from the top of the church, parked half in the ditch. Illuminated by an unseen sun, Shelly Ross stood out in the unreal darkness, substantial in jeans and faded flannel. Up went her rifle, relaxed against her shoulder.

The muzzle flashed. Thunder rumbled.

A wet pop. The River Things recoiled altogether, the cords loosed, and hot tar sprayed over my back. There are no words for how hot that was. Like lying on a stovetop. But the shot was the distraction I needed; the River Things released me. I rolled over the roof, hit the ground, and staggered straight for the fence.

The rifle cracked out again. Seven yards away, a River Thing went down in a blossom of black syrup. I felt that shot all the way through my back and staggered back from the force of it. Around

me, River Things reeled. A wordless hate rolled out of the church, followed by a low moaning sound like an organ out of tune. But I kept going. Even as Ms. Ross fired into the horde over and over again, and I felt the phantom bullets ripping through my spine, I kept going. River Things parted around me, darting in every direction, fleeing to the river. I was forgotten.

White-faced, I lunged to the fence-line. Two bedraggled coyote skins hung there, facing inward; with a start, I saw them not as lifeless skins, but two grinning gatekeepers. The illusion faded as swiftly as it had materialized. I became aware of a growing light and warmth; I vaguely recall tumbling over the fence and being bundled into the warm cab of a truck.

"What the hell have you been doing?" Ms. Ross asked.

I would've been glad to tell her, honestly, but I passed out instead.

§

I had terrifying dreams, most of which I forgot before waking up. The ones I recall include vivid images of the Brazos River valley, black and lonely, viewed from a dozen different viewpoints at once; nervous hogs stared at me from the riverbank. My hunger and emptiness were bottomless, and I blazed with flame from the center of my soul to the tips of all my fingers.

I was in the hospital a long time. I won't bore you with the details. The real story is the black goop that had hit me in the back. The doctors couldn't wash it off—in fact, water only seemed to encourage it. It stretched out dozens of groping fingers and clung to everyone who touched me. That's how I had all the skin chopped off from the back of my neck down to my shoulder blades. My surgeon complained that it had been spreading faster than he could operate and sent several samples up north for study. I never did hear back about the test results.

Here's the clincher: afterward, everyone told me I hadn't been gone for a Saturday afternoon jaunt, but for two weeks. Pistol had raced home with both an empty saddle and holster, and everyone

feared the worst. They had been combing the countryside for me ever since—including several large parties that had gone riding down to the river itself. I couldn't begin to account for it. I started combing through my memories, trying to fit days into minutes.

It only got worse when I asked about Dr. Peaslee.

"Yeah, I remember a Dr. Peaslee," said Ms. Ross. "Sometime in '71, I think? He wanted to see the stones down by the river. Last sign we found of him was his car sitting in front of an open gate. Strangest thing was that he'd left his shoes in the cab. We had no idea what to tell his family." She'd narrowed her eyes. "Why do you ask?"

She was the first person I told the full story to.

Not long afterward, Ms. Ross burned the church down. Sometime later, I heard she went down to the Brazos with dynamite. Nobody will tell me what happened after that. I'm not sure anybody actually knows, but I've got my theories.

I've since moved far away from that rural wasteland, but it has never moved away from me. The dreams came back in later years, and sometimes I am possessed by an intense longing to head down to the river and check on the rocks.

As bad as that is, nothing haunts me more than the memories I have of that voice I heard on the church roof. No, it wasn't Dr. Peaslee—although it was definitely his voice I'd heard in the sanctuary. It was my voice that I had heard on the rooftop. It was my own voice, calling me back to the patchwork god. There's work to be done, it says, before the Lord can swim down to the gulf. There are bones to splint and there are muscles to weave and there is a coat to stitch. There's so much work to do before the third gate opens.

So much work. So little time.

Author Biographies

Joyce Carol Oates is an established and highly prolific writer who has written dozens of novels, shorts story collections, young adult fiction, plays, poetry and essays. Her first published book was the 1963 story collection *By the North Gate*, followed by her debut novel *With Shuddering Fall* in 1964. Other notable works among many include National Book Award winner *them* (1969) and her 26th novel, *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996). The novels *The Falls* (2004) and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) were both New York Times bestsellers, while 2012's *Patricide* was published as an eBook novella. Oates has also written suspense novels under the pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly. Inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1978, Oates has won many of awards over the course of her career, including the Prix Femina Etranger and the Pushcart Prize.

Colleen Douglas, a graduate in Creative Writing, has a South American background. She hails from the former British colony of Guyana

and has lived in London for over two decades. She has always enjoyed works with some form of darkness, be it the gradual creeping or more blatantly obvious kind. Her interest in writing began at the age of 14, when she wrote her first horror story, after reading her father's copy of *Burial: The Manitou* by Graham Masterton. She listens to rock music when writing fight scenes and haunts cafés when she begins and completes a project. The latter may be a frame narrative habit, she cannot honestly account for the former. As a writer, she has always been drawn to the unconventional. She writes dark fantasy with elements of horror and science-fiction. She loves her eclectic disposition and storytelling diversity, as it places her in a unique atmosphere, with new challenges to conquer each time she writes.

Tamsyn Muir is a writer from Auckland, New Zealand, currently based and teaching in the United Kingdom. Her short-form horror fiction has appeared in such publications as *Nightmare Magazine*, *Weird Tales* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

Cat Hellisen is a South African-born writer of fantasy for adults and children. Her work includes the novel *When the Sea is Rising Red* and short stories in *Apex*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction*, *Shimmer Magazine*, and Tor.com. Her latest novel, *Beastkeeper*, is a fairy-tale for the loveless.

Caitlín R. Kiernan is a two-time recipient of both the World Fantasy and Bram Stoker awards, and the *New York Times* has declared her "one of our essential writers of dark fiction." Her recent novels include *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir,* and, to date, her short stories have been collected in twelve volumes, including *Tales of Pain and Wonder, A is for Alien, The Ammonite Violin & Others,* and the World Fantasy Award-winning *The Ape's Wife and Other Stories*. Currently, she is editing her thirteenth and fourteenth collections – *Beneath an Oil Dark Sea: The Best of Caitlín R. Kiernan (Volume 2)* for Subterranean Press and *Houses Under the Sea: Mythos Tales* for Centipede Press. She has recently concluded *Alabaster,* her award-winning, three-volume graphic novel for Dark

Horse Comics. She will soon begin work on her next novel, *Interstate Love Song,* based on "Interstate Love Long (Murder Ballad #8)." She lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

Lucy Catherine Brady grew up as a scruffy metal-head boy from St Albans, Hertfordshire. At age seventeen she discovered the works of H.P. Lovecraft, and has spent the subsequent decade exploring Weird in all its many forms (during which time it also transpired that she was a woman). In 2006 she moved to Norwich to study English at the University of East Anglia, graduating in 2010 with an MA in Medieval and Early Modern Literature. Most recently, she has become a contributing editor for *Project Praeterlimina*, a speculative fiction blog, which she produces in collaboration with a number of artists and writers from Norwich and Brighton. Her interests include Latin, early modern philosophy, and the music of Fields of the Nephilim.

Marly Youmans writes in a number of forms, small and large. She writes poems. She once was mad enough to write an epic poem. She writes

novels, though people say (sometimes disapprovingly!) that she never does the same thing twice. And she writes Southern fantasy novels for children veering toward adulthood; she hadn't planned on that one, but unexpected things happen after children are born. Her collaborations with artists include work with painters Makoto Fujimura, Clive Hicks-Jenkins (Wales), Graham Ward (England), Lynn Digby (Ohio, US), and composer Paul Digby (UK-born but now an Ohioan).

Sonya Taaffe's short fiction and poetry can be found in the collections *Ghost Signs* (Aqueduct Press), *A Mayse-Bikhl* (Papaveria Press), *Postcards from the Province of Hyphens* (Prime Books), and *Singing Innocence and Experience* (Prime Books), as well as in various anthologies including *The Humanity of Monsters* and *Genius Loci: Tales of the Spirit of Place*. She is currently senior poetry editor at *Strange Horizons*; she holds master's degrees in Classics from Brandeis and Yale and once named a Kuiper belt object. She lives in Somerville with her husband and two cats.

Gemma Files is a former film critic and teacher turned award-winning horror author, best-known for her Hexslinger Series of Weird Westerns (*A Book of Tongues*, *A Rope of Thorns* and *A Tree of Bones*, all from ChiZine Publications). She has also published two collections of short fiction, two chapbooks of speculative poetry and a story cycle (*We Will All Go Down Together: Stories of the Five-Family Coven*, CZP). Her new novel, *Experimental Film*, will be available as of November, 2015. To learn more, check up on her at http://musicatmidnight-gfiles.blogspot.ca, or follow Gemma on Twitter, Tumblr or Livejournal.

Molly Tanzer is the British Fantasy and Wonderland Book Award-nominated author of two collections: *A Pretty Mouth* (Lazy Fascist, 2012) and *Rumbullion and Other Liminal Libations* (Egaeus, 2013). Her debut novel, *Vermilion* (Word Horde) is now available, and her second novel, *The Pleasure Merchant*, will be published by Lazy Fascist in November of 2015. She is also the editor of the forthcoming *Swords v. Cthulhu*

(Stone Skin Press). Her Lovecraftian fiction has appeared in venues such as *The Book of Cthulhu* (I and II) (Night Shade), *The Book of the Dead* (Jurassic London) and *The Starry Wisdom Library* (PS Publishing). She has had additional short fiction appear in *Schemers* (Stone Skin Press), *Running with the Pack* (Prime Books) and *The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction*, among others. She lives in Boulder, Colorado with her husband and a very bad cat. She blogs—infrequently—about hiking, vegan cooking, movies, and other stuff at http://mollytanzer.com, and tweets as @molly_the_tanz.

Kelda Crich is a new-born entity. She's been lurking in her creator's mind for a few years. Now she's out in the open. Find her in London looking at strange things in medical museums. Her work has appeared in the *Lovecraft E-zine*, *Journal of Unlikely Acceptances*, *The Mad Scientist Journal* and in the Bram Stoker Award-winning *After Death* anthology.

Karen Heuler's stories have appeared in over eighty literary and speculative journals and anthologies, including several "Best of"

collections. She has published two short-story collections and four novels, and won an O. Henry award in 1998. She lives in New York with her dog, Philip K. Dick, and her cats, Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte.

Lois H. Gresh is a six-time *New York Times* best-selling author and USA Today best-selling author of 29 books and 65 short stories. Look for her trilogy of Lovecraftian Sherlock Holmes thrillers coming soon from Titan Books. Her books have been published in 22 languages. Current titles are *Cult of The Dead and Other Weird and Lovecraftian Tales* (Hippocampus, 2015), *Innsmouth Nightmares* (Editor, PS Publishing, 2015), and *Dark Fusions: Where Monsters Lurk!* (Editor, PS Publishing, 2013).

Nancy Kilpatrick is an award-winning author who has published 18 novels, over 200 short stories, and has edited 15 anthologies, including the 2015 works *Expiration Date*, and *nEvermore! Tales of Murder, Mystery & the Macabre*. Her most recent short fiction can be found in the anthologies *Searchers After Horror*, *The Darke Phantastique*, *Zombie Apocalypse: Endgame!*, *Blood*

Sisters: Vampire Stories by Women, *The Madness of Cthulhu 2*, *Innsmouth Nightmares*, *Gothic Lovecraft* and non-fiction in *Stone Skin Bestiary*. Join her on Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/nancy.kilpatrick.31
and on Twitter:
https://twitter.com/nancykwriter

E.R. Knightsbridge hails from London, England, and enjoys such things as peeling stickers off fruit and binging on TV box sets. Her stories have been published online at *Camroc Press Review* and in a print anthology of dystopian tales, *Small Town Futures*. Another flash fiction piece will appear in the Shade Mountain Press *Female Complaint* anthology in November 2015.

Amanda Downum may or may not be a barrel of crabs piloting a cunning human disguise. She is the author of the Necromancer Chronicles, published by Orbit Books, and *Dreams of Shreds & Tatters*, from Solaris. Her short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Weird Tales*, as well as *Lovecraft Unbound* and *The Mammoth Book*

of Cthulhu. She lives in Austin, Texas, but will one day return to the sea. With or without the human disguise.

Christine Morgan works the overnight shift in a psychiatric facility, which plays havoc with her sleep schedule but allows her a lot of writing time. A lifelong reader, she also reviews, beta-reads, occasionally edits and dabbles in self-publishing. Her other interests include gaming, history, superheroes, crafts, cheesy disaster movies and training to be a crazy cat lady. She can be found online at https://www.facebook.com/christinemorganauthor and https://christinemariemorgan.wordpress.com/

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. This, coupled with a childhood tendency to read the dictionary for fun, led her inevitably to penury, intransigence, the mispronunciation of common English words, and the writing of speculative fiction.
She lives in Massachusetts with a Giant

Ridiculous Dog. Her partner, acclaimed fantasy author Scott Lynch, lives in Wisconsin.

Sarah Monette was born and raised in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, one of the secret cities of the Manhattan Project. She studied English and Classics in college, and have gone on to complete an M.A. and Ph.D. in English Literature. Her novels are published by Ace Books. She has also collaborated with Elizabeth Bear on *A Companion to Wolves* (Tor). Her short stories have appeared in many different places, including *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Alchemy*, *Weird Tales*, and *Strange Horizons*. She collects books, and her husband collects computer parts, so their living space is the constantly contested border between these two imperial ambitions.

Storm Constantine has written 35 books, both fiction and non-fiction, and well over 50 short stories. Her novels span several genres, from literary fantasy, to science fiction, to dark fantasy. She is most well known for her Wraeththu trilogy (omnibus edition published by Immanion Press). Storm is the founder of the

independent publishing house Immanion Press, created with the aim of getting classic titles from established writers back into print and introduce innovative new authors to a reading audience. She's currently working on several ideas for new books, as well as short stories. She lives in the Midlands of England, with her husband, Jim, and four cats.

R.A. Kaelin is a short story writer from Lubbock, Texas. She graduated from the University of North Texas with a BA in English literature. This is her first published work. You can visit her at www.RAKaelin.net.

About the Editor

Lynne Jamneck is a fiction writer and editor. She has been nominated for the Sir Julius Vogel and Lambda awards, and holds an MA in English Literature from Auckland University, New Zealand. Her fiction has appeared in *Jabberwocky*, *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*, *Something Wicked Magazine, Fantastique Unfettered* and the collections *So Fey: Queer Fairy Fiction*, *Tales from the Bell Club, Unconventional Fantasy: A Celebration of Forty Years of the World Fantasy Convention* and *Black Wings of Cthulhu 6* (forthcoming). She is the editor of *Periphery: Erotic Lesbian Futures* (2008) and with S.T. Joshi, she co-edited *Gothic Lovecraft* (Cycatrix Press, 2015).

She blogs at: http://lynnejamneckdiaries.blogspot.co.nz/

Editor’s Notes

Shadows of the Evening *by Joyce Carol Oates*
As I reread this dreamlike story, written some years ago, I am struck by figures of speech and repetitions that resonate deeply with me.

"Magdelena" is imagined as my mother Carolina Bush, who was known as Lena; she too had been born in the Black Rock neighborhood of Buffalo, to a large family of Hungarian immigrants; she too was "given away"—but not at the age of sixteen, at the age of less than a year. My mother's remarks as an elderly woman were poignant to me—"My mother didn't want me. My mother gave me away." Through many decades she remembered this wound of childhood.

The Lovecraftian aura is that of Lovecraft in his more benign, dreamlike and entranced state. Here is not the raw, overwrought horror of the more famous (or infamous) of Lovecraft's stories like “The Rats in the Walls,” “The Dunwich Horror,” or anything involving monstrous creatures; here is a more subtle Lovecraftian accursedness, embodied not in the innocent young girl-witness but in the singer with a beautiful voice who cannot stop singing, whose fate is to sing. Obviously, the singer is an emblem of the artist; the girl suggests normalcy, though she is very much attracted to the singer as a young man, and would have sacrificed herself for him if he had allowed her. (Instead, another presumably innocent young woman has taken her place.) Magdalena will marry a well-to-do young man, whom we've just glimpsed in her aunt's parlor; she will be happily fulfilled as a wife and mother; she will not be coupled with the accursed singer/ artist.

There is some fable here of the doomed artist and his appeal to others who can be haunted by him, though they can never understand him.

It's clear that I was reading Lovecraft's short, sketch-like story "The Music of Erich Zann"—not a typical Lovecraft story, but one which lingers in the memory like a fading dream.

The Genesis Mausoleum *by Colleen Douglas*
When I was a young teen, I went to visit my grandmother, who lived in a village on the East Coast of the Demerara River. She lived in an old-style house, built on stilts near the main road which ran through the village. On late afternoons I would sit on the stairs after my chores. It was one such afternoon that I spotted the flashes of red against the verdant green of the parapet on the opposite side of the road. I was fascinated and tried to discern the source, which turned out to be a green frog tied in a red bow. It proceeded to make its way up the stairs of a neighbour's house and as it reached the top stair it disappeared. Almost instantly, there was awful screaming from within that house. I ran inside to tell my gran what I had seen. She told me to say nothing. That memory stayed with me. Later, I learned the woman in that house was an outsider who came to teach the children and had started an affair with the son of a "spiritualist" (I use the term exceedingly loosely). At the time, I had no context, but in later years when I thought of what I'd seen, William Blake came to mind… "There are things known, and things unknown, and in between are the Doors." It seemed to me that like the neighbor in my grandmother's village, the characters in "The Genesis Mausoleum" had met such a "door".

The Woman in the Hill *by by Tamsyn Muir*
I grew up a few kilometres away from Waikopua Creek in what is today known as Whitford, and consider the New Zealand bushlands and rural existence very evocative of Lovecraftian horror: beautiful, but also isolating and impenetrable. "The Woman In The Hill" takes place in the landscape of Whitford and Turanga, in a time when that isolation would have been much more pronounced than it is today. For the sake of accuracy, the original New Zealand language and spelling has been maintained in this letter.

The Face of Jarry *by by Cat Hellisen*
I walk my dogs along a fairly untouched stretch of coastline, and storms often leave great tangles of kelp along the shore. I started wondering if the gnarls and lines of sepia kelp on white sand were

messages from another world. Jarry and the Long Road are elements from several other stories I've written, where Jarry is a space between worlds, a no-land where dream-detritus gathers. Between dreams and seaweed and purgatory, I had my story.

Our Lady of Arsia Mons *by Caitlín R. Kiernan*
"Our Lady of Arsia Mons" grew out of a conversation I had with artist Lee Moyer, when we first met in Portland at the 2010 HPL Film Festival. He was very excited to show me photos of the Henry Clews sculptures, and he wanted to talk about the possibility that either Lovecraft influenced Clews or Clews influenced Lovecraft, because there's some eerie similarities between their work. Clews was born in Newport, Rhode Island, after all, and maybe Lovecraft had seen an exhibition of his work before he left the states. Something like that. Ultimately, we couldn't find any evidence one way or the other, but it was an exciting possibility, and this story is an expression of gratitude to Lee for introducing me to Clews' magnificently bizarre work.

The Body Electric *by Lucy Brady*
I had wanted to explore the concept of demonology in cyberspace for some time when I came to write “The Body Electric”, and had been reading around the subject of artificial intelligence. The inspiration for the story itself came when I was reminded of a news story I'd read some years ago about the Large Hadron Collider. At the time, the LHC was undergoing a series of unexplained malfunctions. Two theoretical physicists, Holger Bech Nielsen and Masao Ninomiya, proposed a theory that a godlike intelligence that exists in the future (possibly the LHC, or the Higgs Boson itself) was retroactively sabotaging the systems in order to prevent the potentially destructive power of the Higgs Boson from being unleashed. Though probably conceived primarily as a joke, this seemed like an interesting basis for exploring other questions about philosophy and technology, and I thought about how a similar model of an entity outside of time could exist in the field of artificial intelligence. It was this that formed the basis of Eugenia Clarke's

computerized nemesis. Bech Nielsen's interview can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOI8byIV_GI

The Child and the Night Gaunts *by Marly Youmans*
The tiny tales of "The Child and the Night Gaunts" were written at night—*naturellement!*—on the tiptop of a mountain and in a house with glass walls, surrounded on all sides by great crevasses of mist and cold streams. Lovecraft is in these tales (bits of his biography and his creations), along with memories of walking on the paths through Swan Point Cemetery, where he is buried (though his monument keeps vanishing), and many strange things—the recollection of a little gold saltcellar of a boat, the fantastically guised and jeweled catacomb and church skeletons that Paul Koudounaris photographed for his *Heavenly Bodies*, the weird red light of Poe, and even a simple thought that occurred to me on a night 18 years ago, when toxemia pulled me close to the edge of death. Such oddnesses are flecks of color in these Lovecraftian tinies, written as I sat by a dark glass wall, through which I could barely discern the distant mountains, lit by a moon ringed with a moon bow and backed by cloud. Now and then the breeze made tall-flowering pokeweed (edible poke salad when shoots and leaves are young, though dangerous if not properly prepared, and, when mature, poisonous in the root, the leaves, the red stems, and the purple-black berries) brush against the glass wall of the house, startling me with its white heads of blossom.

All Our Salt-Bottled Hearts *by Sonya Taaffe*
I have had an affinity for the sea all my life. My coastline is the cold Atlantic; I jumped into the high tides of the winter sea when I was less than two years old. "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" is the first Lovecraft story I can remember reading and I loved it for all the wrong reasons, at least from Lovecraft's perspective: sea-change, sea-cities, the eternal ocean waiting. I have neither gills nor fins. When I lie in a bathtub, my skin does not crinkle into scales. When I was invited to participate in this anthology, my first idea was, "I want to write about the people Y'ha-nthlei throws back." I am

indebted to Amal El-Mohtar for inspiring the title. One of the characters looks like a dream I had in October 2014.

Every Hole in the Earth We Will Claim As Our Own *by Gemma Files*
I came into this project having just done my story for Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles's all-female Lovecraft anthology, *She Walks in Shadows*, which involved selecting a specific Lovecraft tale and re-spinning it from the perspective of whatever monstrous feminine lay within. So I already knew that with this, I wanted to come at the challenge of writing a Lovecraftian piece the exact opposite way—boil it down for resonances, then proceed with the ones that attracted me most. So this story turned out to be about the sea, a primary Lovecraftian fear/fascination, but also about something I almost never write about (the death of a child) vs. something I've wanted to write about for a really long time (the Indonesian folkloric parasite duo known as the *polong* and the *pelesit*). The former has the power to twist my knobs immediately, because I'm a mother, which is why I normally keep away from it; the latter is fascinating because there's so little mention of it (in English, anyway), and because it's very obviously a metaphor for incurable disease, probably water-borne. Once I found the general method of delivery and an article about Roald Dahl's daughter's death from measles, it all came together fairly quickly after that.

But Only Because I Love You *by Molly Tanzer*
The title, "But Only Because I Love You", came first with this one. That's rare for me… but the idea of my protagonist being asked to do something terrible, and agreeing to do it for the title reason, that really guided the story. I also wanted to see if I could write a piece about women, but from a male point of view, and with a challenging narrative viewpoint. As for that viewpoint, well, I'm lucky I have two friends who have synesthesia, who were willing to talk me through their experience of it to help me along. The experience of smelling or hearing colors or numbers seemed like a natural launching point for a story about the color out of space…

Cthulhu's Mother *by Kelda Crich*
We all come from somewhere. Move back and back through the endless void of time, turn through the strange angles of the past, and you'll find a beginning. Even the most dreadful creatures, the greatest of Old Ones had to have a mother. And if she's still around, then Mother knows best. She doesn't see you the way other people see you. She knows all your little foibles. She's the beginning and she is the end.

All Gods Great and Small *by Karen Heuler*
The most immediate inspiration for "All Gods Great and Small" was "The Rats in the Walls," with its restless motion and its harrowing sense of hidden horror. Those biting little insect teeth are direct descendants of Lovecraft's rats. But I wanted to diverge from some of his trappings. He's not really respectful to women or natives, is he? So I would rely on old gods who were on the side of women and natives—in fact, women were the priests of the old gods, perhaps indicating they had a higher value than men. Also, Lovecraft's gods are colossal, and it amused me to step down, to retain a kind of primordial intent but reduce the size.

Dearest Daddy *by Lois H. Gresh*
"Dearest Daddy" draws on personal experiences in the wine and mushroom tunnels of Blois, France. Dark, dreary, claustrophobic, endlessly long and labyrinthine. Given that men hid in the tunnels amongst the mushrooms to escape capture and death, it seemed like a good setting for a twisted tale.

Eye of the Beholder *by Nancy Kilpatrick*
"Eye of the Beholder" arose from my awareness of stereotypes, particularly those relating to how women should look and act in order to find a mate. The common thinking is that men demand this of women, but I believe that women reinforce these stereotypes with one another, and I wanted to create a story that reflects that while still writing what I hope is a good and creepy read.

Down at the Bottom of Everything *by E.R. Knightsbridge*
I wrote this when I'd just come back from spending a few months living on the biggest and wildest of the Bahamian islands, Andros. In Andros, there are surreal natural phenomena called “Blue Holes” which are inland, water-filled, vertical caves that appear just like lakes when you stumble across them in the woods and forests but they're actually hundreds of metres deep. There's also a local legend about a giant sea monster called a Lusca. I suspect that those two things combined inside my mind to form the basis of the story.

Spore *by Amanda Downum*
The original seed of "Spore" (sorry) came from watching nature documentaries and thinking of *Fungi from Yuggoth*, but it wasn't until Orrin Grey asked the world for fungus stories that it started to grow a plot (sorry) and characters. It took a few more years and many conversations about the chemistry of emotions before it germinated fully (I give up).

Pippa's Crayons *by Christine Morgan*
I think the inspiration for "Pippa's Crayons" started with a random thought, something about "the coloring book out of space." That got me musing about Lovecraftian stories from a child's perspective. Then I wondered about the interesting challenge of approaching it only through dialogue; from there, the weird and creepy conversation just sort of fell into place.

The Wreck of the Charles Dexter Ward *by Elizabeth Bear & Sarah Monette*
"The Wreck of the *Charles Dexter Ward*" is the third of a series of stories we have written in this universe (the other two being "Boojum" and "Mongoose"), which seems to be half Lewis Carroll and half H. P. Lovecraft with a side of Frank Belknap Long, served on a bed of space opera. We hope our love for Lovecraft shows, as well as our efforts to reimagine his universe into something where women have voices, subject positions, stories of their own. Where women, too, can be Mad Scientists, with all that entails. Also, this

universe has giant living ships that are sort of like an interdimensional cross between a pufferfish and an octopus. Neither one of us has ever been able to see the bad in that.

From the Cold Dark Sea *by Storm Constantine*
One of the aspects of Lovecraft's work I've always found intriguing is that of mysterious denizens of the sea interacting with unsuspecting land-dwellers, and in some cases interbreeding with them. All the Cornish words in my story are “made up” in that I simply used a Cornish-English dictionary to create new words, such as Morbenyn Farm, a term that roughly means *sea-woman*, and the village Mordarras, which is *Gate of the Sea*. Lovecraft was also fond of writing about powerful, ancient books that affect humanity, so my story had to have one of its own. However, I did want to turn the Cthulhu genre on its head a little, which I can't really explain without giving spoilers. I'll just say that the outcome isn't typically Lovecraftian.

Mnemeros *by R.A. Kaelin*
When I was a child, I hitched a ride with our neighbor, a withered old rancher with enormous glasses. He pointed out into a field where a rotting farmhouse leaned against a tree.

"That's where I grew up," he said.

I was deeply disturbed. I couldn't imagine watching a meaningful place die away. Surely every time he saw it he compared it to the mental image of what it had been initially. Worse, there was a point where he had to realize that it couldn't ever be put back together again. Horrified, I suddenly realized that my own home would befall the same fate. Someday I would be the one sitting in the rancher's seat. This story pays homage to that memory.

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